

Building the Foundation for Girls'
Education and Empowerment:
The National Programme for Education of
Girls at Elementary Level (NPEGEL)

*Implemented by Assam Mahila Samata
Society (AMSS)*

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Glossary

AMSS	Assam Mahila Samata Society
CBO	Community-Based Organisation
CRCC	Cluster Resource Centre Coordinator (SSA)
DIU	District Implementation Unit (MS)
DPC	District Programme Coordinator (MS)
DRP	District Resource Person (MS)
DSA	District Sports Authority
EBB	Educationally Backward Block
EFA	Education for All
GOI	Government of India
<i>Kishori mancha</i>	Adolescent Girls' Group
MCS	Model Cluster School (NPEGEL)
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
MG	Mothers' Group
MHRD	Ministry of Human Resource Development (GOI)
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MS	Mahila Samakhya
MSK	Mahila Shikshan Kendra
NCERT	National Council of Educational Research and Training
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NPEGEL	National Programme of Education for Girls at Elementary Level
OBC	Other Backward Castes
<i>Sahoyogini</i>	AMSS Field Worker
<i>Sangha</i>	Women's Association
SC	Scheduled Caste
SCERT	State Council of Educational Research and Training
SEBA	Secondary Education Board of Assam
SMC	School Management Committee
SPD	State Programme Director (MS)
SRP	State Resource Person
SSA	Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan
ST	Scheduled Tribe
TLM	Teaching-Learning Material
UEE	Universal Elementary Education
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNGEI	United Nations Girls' Education Initiative
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VEC	Village Education Committee



Executive Summary

In 2003, the Government of India (GOI) launched the National Programme for Education of Girls at the Elementary Level (NPEGEL) aimed at closing the gender gap in elementary schooling in the country. Assam Mahila Samata Society (AMSS) with support from Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) is implementing the scheme in 781 elementary schools in six educationally backward blocks (EBBs) in three districts of Assam since 2007. Currently implementing 14 innovative activities, AMSS aims to promote girl-friendly school environments and improve girls’ participation in education. This study explores the strategic partnership between AMSS and UNICEF for NPEGEL, AMSS’s innovative implementation of the programme, and its impact on girls’ education in the three target districts of Dhemaji, Tinsukia and Udalguri in Assam.

Universal Elementary Education: Closing the Gender Gap

Since 2000, international commitments from the World Education Forum in Dakar, UN Millennium Development Goals (MDG) 2¹ and 3², and the United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative (UNGEI), have accelerated efforts towards achieving gender parity in primary education. UNGEI, a partnership of organisations led by UNICEF, works at the global, regional, and national levels to share knowledge, develop capacity, shape policy, and align aid towards improving girls’ education. In 2007, UNICEF statistics indicated that 101 million children of school-going age were out of school, with more than half of these children being girls. At this rate, the 2015 target of eliminating gender disparity in education and ensuring universal primary schooling will not be met unless focused efforts to improve girls’ education are enhanced.

Girls’ Education in India

In India, girls face major barriers in accessing and fully participating in elementary schooling as a result of social and cultural attitudes towards girls’ education, socio-economic factors, and lack of physical access. A significant obstacle is the societal under-investment in education for girls as compared to boys, which stems from strong patriarchal values that associate girls primarily with the domestic sphere and devalue their potential to contribute to the labour market. Therefore, marriage is commonly viewed as the final goal for girls often signifying the end of their education. Inadequate school facilities, distance to schools, natural disasters, and ‘eve-teasing’ limit girls’ access to education. Poor quality of education along with gender biased curricula, learning materials, and teaching methods further deter girls’ entry, attendance and retention in education.

Table 1. At a Glance: Literacy and Elementary Education in India and Assam³

INDICATORS	INDIA		ASSAM	
	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
Literacy				
Literacy Rate (2011)	82.14	65.46	78.81	67.27
Enrolment-Related Indicators				
% of Elementary Enrolment (2010-11)	51.60	48.40	49.92	50.08
Transition Rate from Primary to U. Primary (2008-09)	83.23	83.85	86.10	90.63

¹ Millennium Development Goal 2 is to achieve universal primary education by 2015.

² Millennium Development Goal 3 is to promote gender equality and empower women. The first target of this goal is to eliminate gender disparity in all levels of education by 2015.

³ Chandramouli (2011); Mehta (2012); NUEPA and GOI MHRD (2011)

Average Drop-Out Rate at Primary (2008-09)	9.35	8.86	20.99	20.39
School and Facility-Based Indicators	INDIA		ASSAM	
% of Elementary Schools <1 km from CRC (2010-11)	18.54		13.07	
% of Elementary Schools 1-5 km from CRC (2010-11)	55.43		66.11	
% of Elementary Schools > 5 km from CRC (2010-11)	26.03		20.82	
% of Schools with Common Toilet (2010-11)	43.21		36.55	
% of Schools with Girls' Toilet (2010-11)	60.28		39.71	

NPEGEL aims to address the prevailing gender gap in elementary education in India by providing access, enabling retention, ensuring higher girl participation in primary and upper primary schooling, and improving the quality of education for girls' empowerment. NPEGEL targets school-going girls from marginalised backgrounds as well as girls who are more likely to drop out and low-achievers. The programme relies on interventions at the cluster⁴ and school levels; one school in the cluster is selected as the Model Cluster School and receives additional facilities to share with cluster schools. The NPEGEL guidelines call for flexible implementation that caters to the educational requirements of the target population, and emphasise community mobilisation as a key strategy for the programme.

Study Methodology

The objective of the study was to document the NPEGEL initiative as implemented by AMSS in three districts and collect case stories for a qualitative impact assessment. Appreciative inquiry was utilised to identify the best-performing MCSs, outstanding instances of girls' achievements and transformations, as well as examples of heightened awareness of gender discrimination in schools and the community. For the study sample, the best-performing MCS was selected in every EBB where AMSS is implementing NPEGEL through a ranking exercise involving the AMSS District Programme Coordinators of Dhemaji, Tinsukia, and Udalguri districts. Due to the higher concentration of NPEGEL schools in the two EBBs in Dhemaji, a total of four MCSs were selected in this district. Once the MCSs were finalised, a corresponding cluster school was also selected.

At each school, the research team conducted key informant interviews and focus group discussions with external and internal stakeholders, and participants (see Table 2). In a follow-up field visit, selected stakeholders were called to AMSS offices for focus-group discussions, and individual interviews for case study collection.

Table 2. Number of Respondents by Districts

Stakeholder	Dhemaji	Tinsukia	Udalguri	Guwahati	Total Stakeholders by Type
AMSS SPD and SRP				2	2
UNICEF Assam Staff				3	3
SSA Personnel	0	3	4	1	8
AMSS DPCs	1	1	1		3
AMSS DRPs	1	1	1		3
AMSS Block Coordinators	4	2	1		7
AMSS <i>Sahoyogini</i>	7	12	9		28
CBO Members & Parents	30	112	6		148
<i>Sangha</i> Members	10	8	22		40

⁴ Educational clusters are a division of EBBs, and comprise, on average, 8-10 schools.

Teachers	20	27	20	67
NPEGEL Trainers	1	5	1	7
Current Students	224	73	33	330
Mainstreamed Students	4	2	7	13
Out-of-School Girls	0	7	3	10
Total Stakeholders Interviewed	302	253	108	669

Activities of AMSS NPEGEL

In order to implement the programme, AMSS conceptualised an NPEGEL model, which extends beyond girls' access to school to their overall development. With support from UNICEF, the preparatory phase of the programme consisted of collecting baseline data, hiring and orienting staff, piloting innovative activities, and training trainers to gender sensitise teachers. The gender sensitisation tools were developed by AMSS and implemented in the field with SSA support over a two year period from 2008-2010. In

this period, UNICEF supported the training of Head Teachers while SSA supported gender training for teachers. In 2010, AMSS's gender training modules for teachers were vetted by experts and practitioners from across the country at a state consultation supported by UNICEF.

The innovative activities piloted with support from UNICEF are now part of the main AMSS NPEGEL model and implemented with support from the regular programme budget provided by SSA. The majority of the AMSS NPEGEL activities are geared towards girl students and designed to complement one another in terms of intended outcomes. Table 3 outlines the programmatic activities which follow four strategies: create an enabling environment; improve school participation and academic performance; promote self-awareness and girls' empowerment; and challenge traditional gender norms.

Impact

Overall, the study revealed positive trends among teachers, community members, currently-enrolled students, and dropout girls. Many teachers and community-based organisation (CBO) members who received NPEGEL gender training became aware of gender discriminatory practices at school and in the home, and were sensitised to problems being faced by girls in their pursuit of education. Proactive teachers and CBO members demonstrated changed attitudes and behaviour by holding village and school-level meetings to sensitise local community members on the importance of girls' education. They also conducted enrolment drives, actively investigated girl-student absenteeism, and engaged girls

Create an Enabling Environment	Head Teacher Training Gender Training for Teachers (Year 1 & 2) Gender Training for CBO Members Award for Best NPEGEL School in Cluster Annual Cluster Meeting Girl Child Day
Improve School Participation and Performance	Remedial Teaching Talent Search Examination Educational Tour Bridge Course Centres (Year 1) Storytelling Sessions (Year 1) Mobile Library
Promote Self-Awareness and Empowerment	Life Skills Training Health Check-Up Camps
Challenge Gender Norms	Self-Defence Training Sports Training Vocational Exposure

in extra-curricular activities. Cluster level activities such as Girl Child Day and the Annual Cluster Meeting contributed to greater community awareness for girls' education, as well as appreciation of girls' talents, skills, and achievements.

The study visits indicated that NPEGEL converged well with AMSS's on-going activities in areas where the organisation already has field presence. This led to enhanced programmatic coordination, efficacy, and sustainability. In AMSS areas, *Sahoyoginis* (field workers) and *sangha* (women's association) women constitute an active taskforce for community mobilisation by identifying out-of-school girls, coordinating and monitoring activities, and initiating enrolment drives. In areas not covered by AMSS's on-going activities, NPEGEL Block Coordinators were found to be crucial for community mobilisation, rapport building with schools and community members, coordination and monitoring, and programme delivery. This was most evident in Dhemaji where there is higher community and teacher involvement as a result of the consistent presence of four Block Coordinators.

A major programmatic achievement includes the institutionalisation of NPEGEL activities piloted with UNICEF support into the regular AMSS NPEGEL model. Activities such as self-defence training, Girl Child Day, annual cluster meetings, educational tour, and the talent search examination were mainstreamed into the regular programme after piloting in the first year. In the case of storytelling sessions, an activity piloted in each of the three districts with funding from UNICEF, is now carried out by community members in Dhemaji and Udalguri districts without support from AMSS.

NPEGEL inputs have resulted in visible changes in girls' attitudes and behaviour both in and out of school. Schools have reported girls' higher enrolment and attendance, and their greater interest in studies. Instruction in life skills has played a major role in regularising girls' attendance in school by emphasising the importance of daily presence and by addressing major causes of absenteeism such as menstruation as a key education-related issue. In addition, girls' academic experiences are enriched by activities such as the educational tour, mobile library, talent search exam, and remedial teaching. Girls have reported higher levels of confidence and self-esteem as a result of life skills and self-defence training. Gender training has also encouraged teachers to treat boys and girls equally and to focus on reticent girl-students. This resulted in greater participation of girls in classrooms.

Higher levels of girls' confidence are evident beyond the school compound. Girls have developed an awareness of their bodies, gender discrimination, patriarchy, and the right to education. This awareness has led many girls to protest unfair or unequal treatment and even stand up against harmful traditional practices, such as child marriage and forced isolation during menstruation. In Dhemaji and Udalguri, girls are even forming *kishori manchas* (adolescent girl groups) to share information, collectively take action, and solve problems in the community. Participating in self-defence and sports trainings has altered girls' perceptions of their own abilities and broken down gender stereotypes. Girls in Tinsukia claim that if they can learn karate, then boys can do household chores and cook. Self-defence training has also increased girls' mobility, and even allowed some to travel to other parts of the state and country to participate in competitions.

AMSS NPEGEL Contributes to National Policy

UNICEF's support for AMSS-run NPEGEL was guided by the global framework of UNGEI. By facilitating AMSS's involvement in state, regional, and national level consultations, UNICEF hoped to bring practitioner experience and grassroots knowledge to the forefront of



policy formulation. Towards this end, UNICEF has provided support to AMSS to carry out surveys in the field, and to document and disseminate the results by producing a report and a film capturing girl's problems in accessing education. The design, delivery and refinement of NPEGEL in Assam informed UNICEF's and AMSS's recommendations for advocacy to reduce the gender gap in education across the country. In December 2011, this process culminated with the active involvement of UNICEF and AMSS in shaping *A National Vision for Girls' Education in India – Roadmap to 2015*, GOI's policy guidelines to achieve MDG 2 and 3.

Challenges and Conclusions

The strength of the AMSS NPEGEL model supported by UNICEF and SSA lies in its success of mobilising school teachers and community members around the issue of girls' education. The programmatic activities were based on the gender training modules which encompassed all activities aimed at 'creating an enabling environment'. This holistic intervention additionally provides girls with complementary inputs that not only address their educational experience, but also their overall development. As rights-based inputs and the formation of girl groups have proven effective in mobilising girls to demand the right to education and fight harmful practices, mainstreaming this strategy is crucial to enhance the efficacy of girls' education programmes. Convergences with women's groups such as *sanghas* and Mothers' Groups, and their ownership of the programme, further validates the need for a strong community mobilisation component to be included in all NPEGEL models.

Although the AMSS-conducted NPEGEL has led to changes in attitudes and behaviours towards girls' education, it must be noted that this change is not seen across the board. Disabling factors such as natural disasters, socially conservative communities, and negligent teachers, pose problems for programme implementation. Insufficient programmatic staff and limited reach as a result of inadequate funding for NPEGEL further restrict the impact of the programme. Block Coordinators from local communities have proven essential for NPEGEL implementation, and should therefore be regularised into the programme. Access to greater resources and widespread institutionalisation of programme components could address inadequate coverage and limited exposure to activities, to strengthen overall impact. Of utmost importance, gender training for teachers must be reinstated into the programme to foster girl-friendly school environments and enhance girls' participation in education.

1 Introduction

Launched in 2003, the National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Level (NPEGEL) is aimed at improving girls' elementary education nationally. The Mahila Samakhya (MS) programme, which started in 1988, works to educate and empower women at the grassroots level and is currently implemented in 10 states. Since 2007, the Assam Mahila Samata Society (AMSS) has been conducting NPEGEL in six educationally backward blocks (EBBs) in three districts, specifically Dhemaji, Tinsukia and Udalguri, with technical and financial support primarily from Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) as well as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). UNICEF Assam has supported AMSS with activity piloting and capacity-building to improve the efficacy, impact, and sustainability of the programme. This study focuses on the AMSS model of NPEGEL, with particular emphasis on the innovative activities designed to meet the programme's objectives and empower girl-children.

1.1 The Importance of Girls' Education

1.1.1 Universal Elementary Education in India

In India, the right to education was first articulated in Article 45 of the 1949 Constitution of India. Since then, successive national policies and programmes, such as the National Policy on Education 1986 and the National Literacy Mission, aimed to enhance efforts towards augmenting participation in elementary education. In the last six decades, the Government of India (GOI) has made significant strides towards achieving universal elementary education (UEE), as seen by increased school participation and availability of schooling facilities.⁵ Most recently, the Right to Education (RTE) Act came into force in 2010 cementing the GOI's commitment to providing free and compulsory education to all children from 6-14 years of age.



Students from the Society ME School, Dhemaji

1.1.2 The Importance of Girls' Education

Achieving UEE requires closing the gender gap in schooling and actively promoting girls' education. According to the World Bank, providing educational opportunities to girls is "one of the most cost-effective ways of spurring economic development"⁶ as educated girls/women, are able to actively contribute to the labour market, and avoid poverty. Educating women correlates with social benefits such as a reduction in infant mortality, increased life expectancy, lower fertility rates, combating HIV/AIDS and other diseases, and developing the capacity to fight violence and support children's schooling.⁷

⁵ Bandyopadhyay and Govinda (2008)

⁶ Phumaphi and Leipziger (2008)

⁷ Patrinos (2008)

However, traditional values, norms, expectations and responsibilities assigned to men and women by societies can create significant barriers to girls' access to education and hinder women's formal employment.⁸ This is the case in India, where girls and women are limited to the household and reproductive spheres and where girls' domestic socialization is prioritised over their education.⁹

Such patriarchal attitudes also permeate the formal education system as the educational curriculum, learning materials, teachers' attitudes, and traditional roles assigned to boys and girls reinforce gender differentiation and patriarchy.¹⁰ As a result, access to formal education alone is not a sufficient tool to empower girls. In order to allow girls to fully benefit from schooling and education, efforts must concentrate on creating awareness, building self-esteem, acquiring confidence, enabling direct access to information, and developing abilities to address unjust systems and unequal treatment.¹¹ Education for girls from marginalised backgrounds must go beyond achieving higher literacy rates and school attendance, and instead, use a holistic approach to build the capacities of girls in all spheres. Furthermore, addressing gender inequity in schooling, and providing women and girls with quality education and skills development can enable them to improve their economic prospects and combat patriarchal values in the labour market and in society.¹²

1.1.3 Challenges in Achieving UEE and Improving Girls' Education

In India, educational outcomes consistently tend to favour boys over girls¹³. Even though basic educational indicators such as enrolment, attendance and retention have increased for girls¹⁴, perceptions of girls' education, socio-economic factors, and gender stereotypes remain barriers for achieving universal girls' elementary education in India.

Table 1. At a Glance: Literacy and Elementary Education in India and Assam¹⁵

INDICATORS	INDIA		ASSAM	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Literacy				
Literacy Rate (2011)	82.14	65.46	78.81	67.27
Enrolment-Related Indicators				
% of Elementary Enrolment (2010-11)	51.60	48.40	49.92	50.08
Transition Rate from Primary to U. Primary (2008-09)	83.23	83.85	86.10	90.63
Average Drop-Out Rate at Primary (2008-09)	9.35	8.86	20.99	20.39
School and Facility-Based Indicators				
% of Elementary Schools <1 km from CRC (2010-11)	18.54		13.07	
% of Elementary Schools 1-5 km from CRC (2010-11)	55.43		66.11	
% of Elementary Schools > 5 km from CRC (2010-11)	26.03		20.82	
% of Schools with Common Toilet (2010-11)	43.21		36.55	
% of Schools with Girls' Toilet (2010-11)	60.28		39.71	

⁸ Månsson and Färnsveden (2012)

⁹ Bandyopadhyay and Subrahmanian (2008)

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ramachandran (2006)

¹² Månsson and Färnsveden (2012)

¹³ Bhalotra and Zamora (2006)

¹⁴ Chandramouli (2011); Mehta (2011)

¹⁵ Chandramouli (2011); Mehta (2012); NUEPA and GOI MHRD (2011)

Poverty deeply affects girls' access to schooling. In almost all states, poor families from marginalised communities prioritise education of sons over daughters.¹⁶ Education data for children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, such as Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST), and religious minorities demonstrate a significant gap in the participation of girls in education.¹⁷

Another consequence of poverty, combined with the under-valuation of girls' education, is the pervasive practice of child marriage. Matrimony signifies the end of educational progress for many girls. Poorer families may marry off their daughters quite young as lower dowries are often demanded for younger brides.¹⁸ As marriage is seen as the ultimate end, girls' education tends to be a low priority for these families.

Despite on-going efforts by GOI to eradicate child labour, it remains a persistent problem in the country. Even when enrolled in school, working children are unable to receive maximum benefits from education.¹⁹ Children working during the day face major problems in attending school altogether and seasonal child labourers (e.g. in agriculture) often miss up to six to eight weeks of schooling.²⁰ Girls are even more disadvantaged since they are also expected to perform domestic duties (e.g. domestic chores and sibling care) thus reducing their time to study.²¹



In Dhemaji, entire villages wiped out by heavy flooding.

In terms of access, girls are detrimentally impacted by the lack of an enabling environment. Inadequate school facilities (e.g. lack of female sanitation facilities), and violence, harassment, and 'eve-teasing' both within and on the way to school, hinder girls' attendance to school. In addition, areas that are prone to natural disasters further impede access to educational facilities. The problems that girls are facing when pursuing education suggests the need for initiatives that provide focused attention on girls to increase their access to education and equip them with the tools to overcome

the systemic barriers they face in schools and communities.²²

¹⁶ Bandyopadhyay and Subrahmanian (2008)

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Swainson (2006)

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid

1.2 National Programme of Education for Girls at Elementary Level (NPEGEL)

In view of the gender gap in education, the GOI introduced the National Programme of Education for Girls at Elementary Level (NPEGEL) in 2003, and assigned its implementation to the Education for All initiative, Sarva Shikshan Abhiyan (SSA). The programme is otherwise delegated to Mahila Samakhya (MS) in its areas of operation due to its activities on women's and girls' empowerment.



NPEGEL promotes reading habits of girls in Tinsukia

NPEGEL's guidelines prescribe that the programme is to be carried out in Educationally Backward Blocks (EBBs)²³ with an overall goal of reducing the gender gap in elementary education. The two specific objectives include: (a) providing access, enabling retention and ensuring higher participation of girls; and (b) improving the quality of education with a stress on relevance and quality of girls' education for empowerment. The target population of the programme includes out-of-school girls, dropout girls, over-

age girls who have not finished elementary education, working girls, girls from marginalised social groups, and girls with low attendance and low levels of achievement.

The framework of NPEGEL requires interventions at cluster and school levels. In a cluster of approximately eight to ten schools, the best school in terms of girl-friendly resources and infrastructure is designated as a Model Cluster School (MCS). In the first year of NPEGEL implementation, the MCS can avail a grant of Rs.30,000 for infrastructural additions such as a library and/or teaching learning material, sports equipment, and vocational training. Cluster schools²⁴ which are also part of NPEGEL are meant to access these additional facilities. An annual ceiling of Rs.60,000 is provided for recurring activities at all schools under each cluster. Since 2003, annual grants for NPEGEL activities have increased slightly in some states.

The implementation of the programme is flexible. Programmatic activities can address the educational needs of the local community to counter persistent problems in girls' education in the area. Under the NPEGEL guidelines, these activities can range from awards to teachers and schools, student evaluations, remedial teaching, bridge courses, alternative schools,

²³ Educationally Backward Blocks (EBBs) are determined by female literacy rates (lower than the national average) and the gender gap in literacy (higher than the national average). According to the NPEGEL guidelines, the programme is also implemented in areas with a significant SC/ST presence, low rates of SC/ST female literacy, and selected urban slums.

²⁴ Cluster schools are distinct from model cluster schools (MCSs). These schools are part of the NPEGEL system in a cluster but do not receive the initial infrastructural grant.

residential schooling, teacher training, child care centres, escorts to school, and the distribution of free textbooks, uniforms, and stationery.

The guidelines further state that remuneration for NPEGEL trainers cannot exceed Rs.1,000 per person in one month and limits their employment for up to three months. Community mobilisation is a key strategy promoted within the guidelines for programme implementation. This includes mobilising community members, teachers, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and other relevant stakeholders to promote girls' education as well as develop a sense of community ownership over the programme.

1.3 Assam Mahila Samata Society (AMSS) and NPEGEL

The Assam Mahila Samata Society (AMSS) is implementing NPEGEL in the three districts of Dhemaji, Tinsukia, and Udalguri (previously part of Darrang district), where the organisation already has a presence. The main goal of Mahila Samakhya is to mobilise grassroots women and strengthen their capabilities as a means of empowerment. Some of AMSS's regular activities include conducting literacy camps for women, and facilitating the formation of *sanghas* (women's associations), *kishori manchas* (adolescent girl groups) and federations. The organisation also offers bridge courses and operates residential learning centres (i.e., *Mahila Shikshan Kendras* - MSKs) to mainstream girls who have not completed their education. In addition, AMSS is active in setting up *Nari Adalats* (informal courts for women), building the capacities of *sangha* women and secondary stakeholders, and carrying out campaigns against detrimental traditional practices such as 'witch hunting'.

In February 2007, SSA and AMSS signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to officiate the latter's implementation of the NPEGEL scheme in Dhemaji, Tinsukia and Udalguri districts. To inform the planning phase of the programme, AMSS sought to understand the situation of girls on the ground, collect baseline data, and orient schools and communities towards NPEGEL. As the SSA allotted budget for NPEGEL did not cover these provisions, AMSS approached UNICEF, and together, the two agencies have collaborated to design and deliver a unique NPEGEL model.

1.4 UNICEF Support for AMSS NPEGEL in Assam

UNICEF in Assam collaborates with the Government of Assam and other civil society partners such as AMSS to promote the survival and development of children. Its specific activities aim to improve the health and nutrition of children; enhance teaching and learning in schools; provide a safe environment; protect the rights of children; and enable policy review and institutional reform. UNICEF Assam's work focuses on children under three years of age, and school-going children from 4-18 years of age. With a long history of partnership with the Government of India (since 1949), UNICEF brings abundant technical expertise and innovative interventions to enable children to achieve their full potential.

1.4.1 Situating UNICEF Support within the Global Agenda for Girls' Education

Universal primary education²⁵ has been on the global agenda since the United Nation's 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which entitles each individual to receive free and compulsory primary education. The 1990 World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien,

²⁵ Primary education comes after pre-schooling or nursery and precedes secondary education. Different countries define 'primary' education in different terms viz. the number of years. According to UNESCO, primary education is the first stage of basic education and begins for students from the ages of 5 to 7 years.

Thailand, affirmed the international community’s commitment to provide quality education to children as well as adults, and resulted in the launch of the Education for All (EFA) campaign by UNESCO, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF and the World Bank. Ten years later, the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, convened to address the lack of progress for universal primary schooling and the 164 participating countries committed to renewing efforts towards achieving this goal.

Both the 1990 World Conference on Education and the 2000 World Education Forum identified education for girls and women as an urgent priority. As a result, former Secretary-General Kofi Annan launched the United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative (UNGEI), aimed at assisting governments to meet their commitments in providing girls aged 5-15 with a good quality education. This initiative is supported by a partnership of organizations including thirteen UN bodies led by UNICEF.

Millenium Development Goals

- **MDG 2:** Achieve universal primary education
Target 2.A: Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling
- **MDG 3:** Promote gender equality and empower women
Target 3.A: Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015

Educational For All

- **Goal 2:** Ensure that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality.
- **Goal 5:** Eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieve gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls’ full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality.

UNGEI’s goals and work are motivated by the Millennium Development Goals 2 and 3, which reinforce the agreements laid out in the 1990 and 2000 global conferences, as well as EFA goals related to gender equality. The Initiative works at the global, regional, and national levels and focuses on three main strategies: (a) providing technical outputs and capacity development; (b) engaging and promoting policy dialogue and advocacy; and (c) enhancing and allocating aid towards girls’ education.

UNICEF’s support for AMSS and NPEGEL in Assam is guided by the framework of UNGEI, its policy directives, and the advancement of its over-arching goals. As a first step, UNICEF Assam provided tools and resources to build the foundations of a holistic NPEGEL intervention. In addition, UNICEF has provided catalytic support for AMSS NPEGEL implementation, focusing on programmatic gaps. To inform national dialogue and enhance interventions for girls’ education in India, UNICEF has supported AMSS to bring lessons learnt from field implementation to the policy-making arena.

UNICEF Support for AMSS NPEGEL

<p>Laying the Foundation for NPEGEL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Orienting and Appointing AMSS Staff - NPEGEL Block Coordinators • Creating Tools for Gender Sensitisation and Supporting its Delivery • Piloting innovative NPEGEL activities (with SSA) 	<p>Influencing Policy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Documentation and film on girls’ access to education in Assam • AMSS’s involvement in national policy dialogue on girls’ education in India
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1.4.2 Laying the Foundation for NPEGEL

Orienting and Appointing AMSS Staff

AMSS recruited six Block and 55 Cluster Coordinators to oversee community mobilisation efforts and initiate the programme in their respective areas. With UNICEF support, these staff members were oriented to AMSS NPEGEL at state and district levels from May to June 2007. The orientations provided insight into the challenges facing girls' education, NPEGEL scheme, AMSS NPEGEL structure and activities, and roles and responsibilities. In 2007-2008, the cost of hiring Block and Cluster Coordinators had been covered in the SSA NPEGEL budget. However, by the second year of the programme (2008-2009), this budgetary provision was no longer made, compelling AMSS to discontinue all 55 Cluster Coordinators. With funding support from UNICEF, eight Block Coordinators were recruited (i.e. four in Dhemaji, three in Tinsukia and one in Udalguri). Today, only four Block Coordinators remain to manage the programme in Dhemaji since the concentration of NPEGEL schools in this district is comparatively greater.

Gender Orientation and Sensitisation for Schools

When tasked with NPEGEL implementation, AMSS recognised the importance of sensitising school staff and local communities to create a girl-friendly environment. With support from UNICEF, AMSS organised a series of workshops from 2008 to 2010 to develop tools for gender sensitising Head Teachers, teachers, and community members. Once the modules were finalised, UNICEF supported the training of trainers on gender sensitisation and printing of training materials. AMSS conducted gender training for teachers until 2010 through the regular NPEGEL budget provided by SSA while Head Teacher training was carried out in 2008 and 2011 with support from UNICEF. By 2010, however, AMSS had to stop gender training for teachers as government school teachers were scheduled to receive 20 days' training annually, directly from SSA.

Piloting Innovative Activities to Engage Disadvantaged Girls

In the first year of the programme, 12 innovative activities were selected for piloting. AMSS used these pilots to learn how to implement successful initiatives based on interest, participation levels, and responses of girls. UNICEF supported the piloting of eight activities including bridge course centres, self-defence training, and talent search examination while SSA funded awards to the best school and girl-child, vocational training, and community mobilisation. UNICEF also provided sports and recreational equipment such as footballs, carom boards, and skipping ropes to all 55 MCSs to increase girls' access to, and use of such materials. After the initial years, SSA's funding support for AMSS NPEGEL grew and many of these piloted activities were subsumed into the regular programme budget.

1.4.3 Influencing Policy

To contribute to knowledge management and advocacy efforts, UNICEF supported AMSS for field data collection and the documentation of the situation of girls' access to education in Assam. A film entitled '*Pratiksha*' was also produced on this subject. As part of the study, girls from the field areas attended a State-level workshop, where they shared their experiences highlighting problems in accessing education.

UNICEF facilitated AMSS's active involvement in national, regional, and state consultations to inform policy development towards improving gender equality in education. AMSS shared its experiences from NPEGEL implementation and its field-based research at these consultations, and also screened the film, *Pratiksha*. This process culminated in UNICEF's and AMSS's active involvement in the development of the Roadmap document of the

Ministry of Human Resource Development's (MHRD), which paves the way for the country to improve girls' participation in education until 2015.

2 Study Methodology

2.1 Area Profile

In its implementation of NPEGEL, AMSS targets girls from marginalised populations, such as SCs, STs, other backward castes (OBCs), and religious minorities. The AMSS NPEGEL blocks in Dhemaji and Udalguri have high concentration of STs such as the Bodo, Mising, Deori, Lalung, Hazangs, as well as OBCs. In addition, these two districts are underdeveloped in terms of infrastructure and villages are geographically dispersed making travel, communication, and access to schooling difficult, particularly for girls. Dhemaji is further affected by annual floods, which at times leave parts of the district under water for six months of the year. Tinsukia, on the other hand, consists of large populations of tea communities and OBCs. The tea community is one of the most excluded groups in Assam as indicated by comparatively lower socio-economic development. As a result, many early adolescent girls begin working in the tea gardens as regular or casual workers, while younger girls stay at home for domestic chores and sibling care. In all three districts, low socio-economic status compels many girls to engage in domestic and agricultural labour to supplement their families' incomes.

To address the unique educational challenges of these populations and promote improvement



Tea garden communities in Tinsukia

in girls' education, AMSS is carrying out 14²⁶ activities as part of the NPEGEL programme. Since the inception of these activities, the coverage of disadvantaged girls, both in school and dropouts, has increased; 17,336 girls participated in AMSS NPEGEL activities in 2009-2010²⁷ as compared to 13,879 girls in 2008-2009.²⁸

At the end of 2006, GOI's MHRD assigned AMSS with implementing NPEGEL in 781 elementary schools across 55 clusters in six EBBs of Dhemaji, Tinsukia and Udalguri districts of Assam. Table 2 shows the number of clusters and schools, by district, block and cluster.

²⁶ In previous years, AMSS also conducted bridge course centres, storytelling sessions, and gender training for teachers. However, since these activities are no longer conducted, the total number of AMSS NPEGEL activities amounts to 14.

²⁷ 2009-10 Annual Report, AMSS

²⁸ 2008-09 Annual Report, AMSS

District	EBB	Clusters	No. of Schools	
			Primary	Upper Primary
Dhemaji	Sisiborgaon	17	223	41
	Murkongselek	15	171	23
Tinsukia	Hapjan	6	57	7
	Guijan	4	40	7
	Itakhuli	4	51	5
Udalguri	Bhergaon	9	128	28
3 districts	6 blocks	55 clusters	670 primary schools	111 upper primary schools

2.2 Study Objectives

The main objective of this Good Practice study, conducted between August 2011 and January 2012, was to document AMSS's innovative methods for NPEGEL implementation in Assam, with support from UNICEF and SSA. The specific objectives of the study were as follows:

- 1) To document the process of the NPEGEL initiative conducted by AMSS in three districts, Dhemaji, Tinsukia and Udalguri, reflecting on the different activities being carried out
- 2) To document case studies and human interest stories for a qualitative impact assessment.

2.3 Study Methodology

During the course of two field visits to Assam, the team visited all six EBBs in Dhemaji, Tinsukia, and Udalguri districts. Individual interviews, informal discussions, and focus-group discussions were conducted with three distinct sets of stakeholders. The research team visited 17 AMSS-NPEGEL schools, including eight schools in Dhemaji, seven schools in Tinsukia, and two schools in Udalguri (see Table 3).

Schools Visited	Dhemaji	Tinsukia	Udalguri	Total Schools by Type
MCS	4	3	1	8
Cluster Schools	4	4	1	9
Total Schools Visited	8	7	2	17

In total, the research team spoke with 669 stakeholders across the three districts (see Table 4). A total of 353 girl participants, 74 teachers and trainers, and 188 community members were interviewed at the cluster-level. Formal and informal discussions were held with AMSS staff including the State Programme Director (SPD) and State Resource Person (SRP), three District Programme Coordinators (DPCs), three District Resource Persons (DRPs), seven Block Coordinators, and 28 *Sahoyogini* (field workers). The research team met with three members from UNICEF (Chief of Field Office, Education Specialist, and Education Consultant) and conducted follow-up consultations with the UNICEF Education Specialist. Furthermore, the researchers interviewed eight SSA officials in Guwahati, Tinsukia and Udalguri. In Dhemaji, a total of 302 stakeholders were interviewed. In Tinsukia, interviews and focus-group discussions were held with 253 participants and stakeholders compared to 108 stakeholders in Udalguri district.

²⁹ 2008-09 Annual Report, AMSS



Table 4. Number of Respondents by Districts

Stakeholder	Dhemaji	Tinsukia	Udalguri	Guwahati	Total Stakeholders by Type
AMSS SPD and SRP				2	2
UNICEF Assam Staff				3	3
SSA Personnel	0	3	4	1	8
AMSS DPCs	1	1	1		3
AMSS DRPs	1	1	1		3
AMSS Block Coordinators	4	2	1		7
AMSS <i>Sahoyogini</i>	7	12	9		28
CBO Members & Parents	30	112	6		148
<i>Sangha</i> Members	10	8	22		40
Teachers	20	27	20		67
NPEGEL Trainers	1	5	1		7
Current Students	224	73	33		330
Mainstreamed Students	4	2	7		13
Out-of-School Girls	0	7	3		10
Total Stakeholders Interviewed	302	253	108	6	669

The study employed a qualitative approach to generate a rich and in-depth understanding of AMSS NPEGEL activities’ design and implementation, and the programme’s impact as a whole. Appreciative inquiry was used with AMSS to identify the best-performing schools and students, as well as capture the many facets of the programme using a multi-stakeholder analysis. The research team designed the conceptual framework (see Annex 1), instruments for multi-stakeholders interviews (see Annexes 2a and 2b), list of relevant stakeholders (see Annex 3), and selection criteria to identify the best MCS in each block (see Annex 4). These study materials were vetted and finalised with AMSS and UNICEF. The team met with UNICEF at the start of the project to define the objectives and parameters of the study. In addition, telephonic consultations were held with UNICEF to outline the agency’s role in NPEGEL design and support, and to gain insight into girls’ education in India and worldwide.

In consultation with representatives from each district, the best-performing MCSs from each block were selected through a ranking exercise based on pre-determined indicators (see Annex 4). It was decided that the research team would visit one MCS and a corresponding cluster school in each of the six EBBs. An exception was made for Dhemaji where two MCSs and two cluster schools were selected for the study sample. This is because there was a higher concentration of NPEGEL schools in each of Dhemaji’s EBBs. During the follow-up field visit, the study sample was altered slightly to include only upper primary NPEGEL schools as children at the primary level were unable to remember their experiences with NPEGEL.

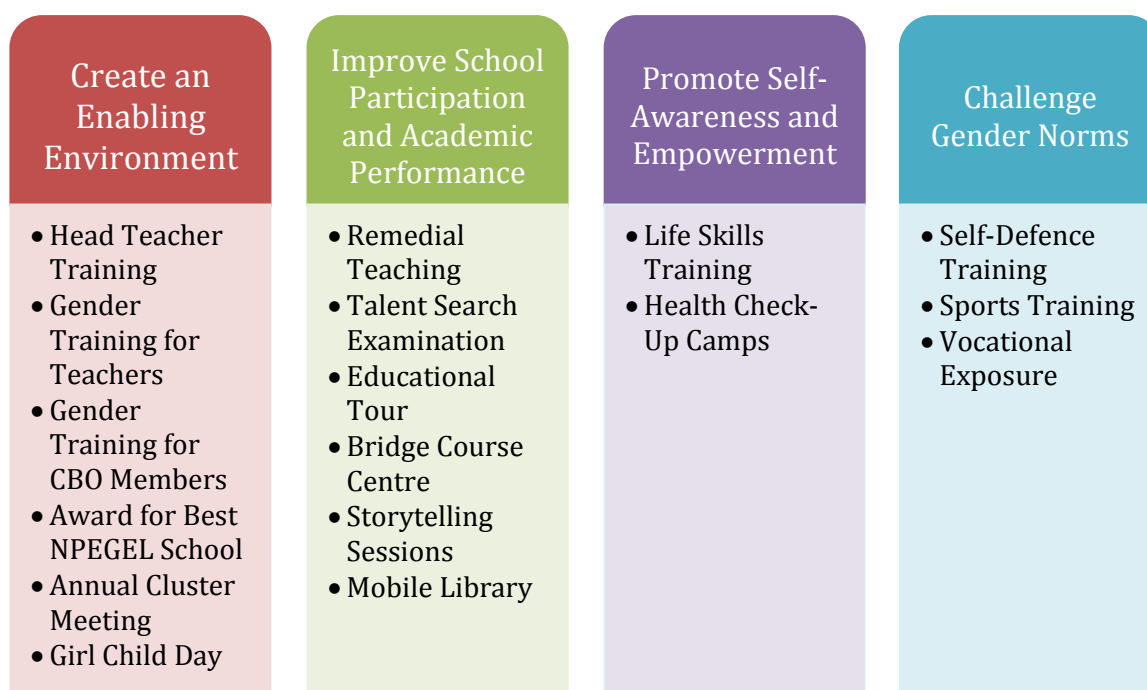
3 AMSS Strategies and Activities for NPEGEL Implementation

NPEGEL is a process-oriented programme in which a basket of activities are designed to evolve through local participation. Programme guidelines clearly indicate that each EBB must select and design activities according to local needs and conditions. Strategies include

mobilisation of local communities, teachers, and NGOs; providing various inputs aimed at improving girls’ education indicators; and making school environments more girl-friendly.³⁰

Keeping these principles in mind, AMSS conceptualised a variety of distinct strategies to meet the programme’s goals and specific objectives. AMSS conducts capacity-building activities for **creating an enabling environment** to ensure school and community support for girls’ education and empowerment. In addition, AMSS works to **improve school participation and academic performance of girls** to encourage equal access and achievement at schools. To further girls’ achievements in schools and their lives, AMSS NPEGEL activities **promote self-awareness and girls’ empowerment** through awareness-raising on health and rights-based issues. Lastly, by **challenging traditional gender norms**, AMSS and UNICEF hope to ignite change in the attitudes and behaviours of communities and schools towards girls in all spheres, as well as empower girls to overcome social discrimination and harmful practices.³¹

In line with these four strategies, AMSS designed a set of 17 activities for sensitising teachers and members of school-based CBOs, and addressing the academic and developmental aspects of girl-students. Many of these NPEGEL activities were piloted with support from UNICEF and are now carried out primarily with financial support from SSA.



3.1.1 Creating an Enabling Environment

Head Teacher Training: Conducted by AMSS in Guwahati, these three-day trainings focus on the psycho-social aspects of girls’ education and the status of girls in the community, at home as well as in their schools. With support from UNICEF, Head Teacher training was delivered in 2008 and 2011 to all the Head Teachers of the 55 MCSs.

³⁰ Guidelines for Implementation of the ‘National Programme of Education for Girls at Elementary Level’ (NPEGEL) as a component of scheme of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)

³¹ Interview with SPD, AMSS State Resource Centre, Guwahati (Sep. 2011)

Gender Training for Teachers: The gender training module, developed by AMSS and supported by UNICEF, illustrates the causes of lower rates of girls' participation in education with special attention to social issues (see Annex 5). In 2008 and 2009, AMSS organised two-day gender trainings for teachers in each district with SSA support. Since 2008, a total of 1,549 teachers have undergone gender training.

Gender Training for CBO Members: To sensitise parents and community members to support girls' education, AMSS conducts two-day orientation programmes for members of VECs, SMCs, and MGs on an annual basis. A group of approximately 35-40 members are covered at a time in each cluster.

Award for Best NPEGEL School: Every year, one school is selected as the 'Best NPEGEL School' in the cluster. The criteria for the best school takes into account various factors, such as regular girls' attendance at school and high girl retention rates. The winning school receives a certificate and an in-kind donation worth Rs.5,000.

Annual Cluster Meeting: AMSS convenes an Annual Cluster Meeting to elicit feedback about NPEGEL activities from girl-students, CBO members, teachers, and guardians. During these meetings, girls participate in performances and competitions, and are also awarded for their achievements. Participants also discuss various societal and area-specific problems that affect girls' education.

Girl Child Day: At the cluster-level, Girl Child Day is observed during the school year, either on 24 September or 24 January. At least 10 girls from each cluster school and the MCS participate in the event and engage in various competitions, winning prizes such as storybooks, stationery, and other items useful for school. Members of CBOs, parents, Panchayat representatives, and SSA functionaries are also invited to attend.

3.1.2 Improving School Participation and Academic Performance

Remedial Teaching: For academically weaker girls, AMSS delivers remedial teaching to enable these students to perform better in school and motivate them to continue with their



Girls taking the talent search exam in Tinsukia

education. Generally made available to girls from Class IV-VII, remedial teachers provide instruction in difficult subjects and languages. Remedial teaching is provided for students from one school or a group of schools in the cluster for one to three months.³²

Talent Search Examinations: The talent search examination is conducted for girls studying in Classes IV and VII (or Class V and VIII starting from the 2012 academic year) to provide exposure to inter-school competitions and encourage higher academic achievement. Prizes, including a

³² Interview with SPD, DPC and DRP, Tinsukia DIU Office (List of Activities worksheet) (Aug. 2011); Interview with Remedial Teacher, Khagarabari Janata ME School, Ghorashal, Bhergaon, Udalguri (Sep. 2011)

certificate and books, are given to the girls who stand first, second and third in each cluster.

Educational Tours: AMSS offers an opportunity for experiential learning through educational tours. Girl students from Class V-VII are chosen based on their performance in the talent search exam and school work. In Tinsukia and Udalguri, five girls are selected per cluster while in Dhemaji, a total of 80 students are chosen from the two EBBs. Students are taken to national parks, local government or corporation offices, railway stations, museums, historical and religious sites, and other places of interest.

Bridge Course Centres: In 2007, AMSS established 12 bridge course centres, with UNICEF's support, to mainstream dropouts or girls who were not enrolled into the formal education system.³³ In Dhemaji and Tinsukia districts, the bridge course was conducted for six months, whereas in Udalguri, the duration was two months. This activity was discontinued after the first year of NPEGEL since other service providers started conducting short-term bridge courses.³⁴



A remedial teaching class in Tinsukia

Storytelling Sessions: To interest girl-students in folklore, histories, and cultural traditions of their regions, AMSS with support from UNICEF, conducted storytelling sessions in the first year of NPEGEL.

A knowledgeable community member (e.g. an elder) was appointed to hold storytelling sessions before an audience of girls. In subsequent sessions, girls would create and share their own

stories. This activity was piloted in ten schools in each cluster of the six EBBs. In the second year of the programme, support from UNICEF and AMSS was no longer required as high levels of participation and enthusiasm among girls and community members in Dhemaji and Udalguri districts triggered the widespread institutionalisation of the activity.

Mobile Libraries: AMSS sets up a mobile library at each MCS for girls from all schools in the cluster. To encourage reading habits, books on famous individuals, fiction, general knowledge and science, are kept in this library. These books are expected to reach each cluster school on a rotational basis. However, due to staff constraints, the “mobility” of the library is restricted to the MCS.

³³ 2007-08 Annual Report, AMSS

³⁴ AMSS, *Write-Up on the Activities Conducted Under the National Programme for Education of Girls at the Elementary Level in the Year 2007-08*

3.1.3 Promoting Self-Awareness and Empowerment

Life Skills Training: Each year, 30-35 girl students from one school per cluster are provided a three-day training on life skills. At the primary level, girls are taught about proper nutrition, and the importance of personal hygiene and cleanliness. At the upper primary level, issues regarding early marriage, menstrual hygiene, and social taboos are discussed. Upper primary girls are encouraged to create *kishori manchas* (adolescent girl groups) to act as a forum and stand up against harmful practices. This activity is funded primarily by SSA with additional support from UNICEF.

Health Check-Up Camps: To address the health status of girls, AMSS has conducted health check-up camps with support from SSA. These camps are organised at MCSs in collaboration with the GOI's National Rural Health Mission (NRHM). The weight and height of each girl is taken, and underweight girls are provided with iron tablets. Strong linkages have yet to be established with the local health workers, making it difficult to implement this activity on a regular basis.

3.1.4 Challenging Gender Norms

Self-Defence Training: Self-defence training, for girls of Classes IV-VII, includes preparatory stretching exercises leading up to karate, kung fu, taekwondo, or boxing. The duration of the training is 45 days. In every district, self-defence is provided annually in one school per cluster.

Sports Training: The introduction of self-defence prompted many NPEGEL girls to demand sports such as football, volleyball, and archery. Sports equipment including a football, cricket bat and ball, carom board, and skipping rope were provided to schools as part of NPEGEL. As with self-defence training, sports training is conducted in one school per cluster every year.



Happy winning medals self-defence competitions, Dhemaji.

Vocational Exposure: For overage girls who cannot attend school, AMSS provides vocational exposure to introduce them to different types of trades. These exposures are held for approximately seven days at a central location in a cluster. Initially, traditionally male-dominated trades were chosen with the exception of Dhemaji district, where it was discontinued after two years.

4 Impact

Through its various innovative activities, AMSS has been able to not only reach out to girls from Classes I to VIII but also develop gender awareness among CBO members and sensitise teachers towards creating a girl-friendly environment in schools. In MS areas, the regular activities of AMSS converge to enhance the effectiveness of NPEGEL. As a result of the

activities conducted, teachers and community members have observed that girls' enrolment, attendance, and academic performance in many schools has improved.³⁵

At an individual level, the programme has led to changes in attitudes and behaviour. However, these changes are not discernible among all girls, teachers, and community members across all the districts. Since NPEGEL activities can only cover a limited number of students, teachers and/or community members in each year, and do not generally allow for repeated inputs, impact is not widespread. Individual cases, however, indicate that the programme has the potential to transform school environments for girls if additional resources and manpower are made available (see Box 1).

Box 1. Overall Development through NPEGEL

Jaishree Saikia is a student of Class VIII in Baruahola MV School, Guijan Block of Tinsukia District. She is the third child of a very poor family. Her father is a daily wage earner who works as a mason and her mother is a housewife. She was an ordinary student in her class, very shy and afraid of making mistakes and speaking up. As a result, she never took part in any competitions held at the school. She was also irregular in her attendance – headaches, stomach aches, menstrual pain and various other reasons kept her away from school quite often.

When NPEGEL was introduced at Baruahola School, however, Jaishree received the opportunity to take part in numerous activities that have drastically changed her entire persona, educational experience, and overall development. In Class IV, Jaishree succeeded in achieving first place in the talent search examination in the cluster. With newly found self-confidence, she became motivated to study for a government scholarship offered to Class VII students in which she attained second place. An avid reader, Jaishree is a regular user of the mobile library and has developed an interest in reading books covering general topics other than her school subjects.

In Class VI, Jaishree participated in life skills and self-defence trainings. Initially her mother objected to her taking part in karate as she was worried that an injury would force her daughter to miss school. If absent, Jaishree would miss the Mid-day Meal provided at school. Later, when her mother saw what the girls were taught, her opinion changed. She even sent Jaishree's younger brother to watch what his sister was learning!

The life skills training helped Jaishree understand the importance of attending school regularly and, at the same time, gave her the confidence to take part in competitions in her school as well as those held in other places. This training allowed Jaishree to find her voice and negotiate within the family. Jaishree convinced her father, a former alcoholic, to quit drinking by explaining that his habit would not only prevent his children from fulfilling their dreams, but also ruin the entire family.

Jaishree recounts how, although her school did have sports, she had never realised that girls could also



Jaishree performing in a Bihu dance

³⁵ Interviews with DPC, Udalguri DIU Office (Sep. 2011); CBO Members, Baruahola M.V. School, Baruahola, Guijan, Tinsukia (Sep. 2011)

take part. From engaging in the self-defence, sports, and life skills trainings provided by NPEGEL, she learned an important lesson: “Whatever work the boys are doing, we [girls] can also do. And whatever work we are used to doing, boys can do that as well.”

Jaishree aspires to pursue studies in science and become a doctor.

Source: Interview with Jaishree Sakia, Baruahola MV School, Baruahola, Guijan, Tinsukia (Sep. 2011)

4.1 A Gender-Sensitised Environment

The impact of AMSS’s gender sensitisation trainings for teachers and CBO members along with awareness-generating activities such as Girl Child Day and Annual Cluster Meeting have contributed towards creating an environment conducive for girls to study as well as achieve excellence in different areas of life. Evidence from all three districts demonstrates changes in community perceptions of traditional gender norms. In some cases, teachers and community members actively address these issues to improve girls’ participation in education and ensure equity at home and school. The success of NPEGEL gender training on the mind-set and behaviour of teachers and students demonstrates immense potential to transform the educational experience of girls across the country.

4.1.1 Teachers Promoting Girls’ Education

In the AMSS NPEGEL schools, both Head Teachers and regular teachers initially felt that there was no need for gender training as most schools and teachers, in their opinion, were already supportive of girl students. The gender training for teachers and orientation of Head Teachers gradually brought out how subtle gender inequalities exist, and created awareness of ingrained patriarchal practices that continue to persist in schools. Gender-sensitised teachers in Dhemaji, Tinsukia and Udalguri, developed a new consciousness of gender stereotypes and biased practices in school and at home. For example, girls are generally assigned tasks primarily associated with the domestic domain such as cleaning, arranging flowers, and leading prayers.³⁶ Boys, on the other hand, are served more food, receive pocket money, and are picked to answer questions in classes.³⁷



Deepak, a gender-sensitised teacher, working to reduce girls’ absenteeism

As a result, gender-sensitised teachers have instituted various policies to address these gender biases. For example, girls and boys are required to sit together in classrooms.³⁸ Boys are

³⁶ Interviews with Focal Teacher and CBO members, Baruahola MV School, Baruahola, Guijan, Tinsukia (Aug. 2011); Various Gender Trained Head and Regular Teachers, Dhemaji DIU Office (Nov. 2011); Various Gender Trained Head and Regular Teachers, Udalguri (Nov. 2011)

³⁷ Interviews with Runami Das, Head Teacher, Bijoypur ME School, Borlung, Murkongselek, Dhemaji (Nov. 2011); Head and Regular Teachers, Telam Tribal ME School, Telam, Murkongselek, Dhemaji (Nov. 2011)

³⁸ Interview with Various Head and Regular Teachers, Dhemaji DIU Office (Nov. 2011)

asked to share in cleaning activities, leading prayers, and running errands previously expected of girls.³⁹ School teachers now appoint female Prime Ministers or Presidents in Student Parliaments. Judha Pradan, the science teacher of Telam Tribal ME School in Dhemaji district, explained how before the gender training, he would regularly call on boys to write on the blackboard; now, he makes it a point to invite girls to do so.

Teachers are more sensitised to the difficulties faced by girls in accessing education. In Telam cluster of Murkongselek block in Dhemaji district, girls often have to travel long distances to school and face ‘eve-teasing’ or sexual harassment from boys en route. Khajuram Bole, the Head Teacher of Telam Tribal ME School, spoke with community members to address this issue.⁴⁰ Similarly, Runami Das, the Head Teacher of Bijoypur ME School in Dhemaji district spoke with the boys in her school to end eve-teasing, asking them to imagine themselves as victims of this harassment.⁴¹ In Dhemaji and Udalguri districts, teachers even accompany girls to the Annual Cluster Meetings to encourage their participation and ensure their safety.⁴²

Teachers convene meetings in villages, schools, and communities to enlighten parents about the existence of patriarchal systems that inhibit girls’ progress and academic achievements. These meetings help elicit community support for girls’ participation in NPEGEL and encourage attitudinal changes and behaviour towards girls. This has even resulted in teachers motivating the community to take strong action against issues such as girl trafficking (see Box 2).

Box 2. Gender-Trained Teacher Leads Fight against Trafficking

In Niz Garuahjhar cluster of Udalguri district, over 30 girls were trafficked for domestic labour and prostitution to multiple locations in north and northeast India. The trafficking broker convinced families that ‘employment opportunities’ for their daughters could pay them a monthly sum of Rs.2,000. As the average income of households in the area was only Rs.500 per month, families felt compelled to accept this lucrative offer. However, once the girls left, the families lost contact with them and had no information on their whereabouts.

Nazir Hussain, a school teacher in Udalguri district, received NPEGEL gender training as well as issue-based training supported by UNICEF on child trafficking. Sensitive to the plight of adolescent girls and their trafficking, Nazir immediately took corrective action. He mobilised local community members, CBO members, teachers from other schools, and staff of Kalyan, an NGO working in the area, and held a meeting to devise an action plan. The group was determined to do everything possible to bring the girls back home.

The NGO members approached the police station, filed a complaint, and started investigations. Kalyan members along with Assam Police officials travelled to Delhi in search of the trafficked girls. In line with legal procedures, police authorities in Delhi had on record files of the missing girls as registered workers. Kalyan and the Assam Police managed to track down the broker who was

³⁹ Interviews with Various Gender Trained Head and Regular Teachers, Udalguri district (Nov. 2011); Various Gender Trained Head and Regular Teachers, Dhemaji DIU Office (Nov. 2011); Various Gender Trained Head and Regular Teachers, Tinsukia DIU Office (Dec. 2011)

⁴⁰ Interview with Head and Regular Teachers, Telam Tribal ME School (Dec. 2011)

⁴¹ Interview with Runamai Das, Head Teacher, Bijoypur ME School, Borlung, Murkongselek, Dhemaji (Nov. 2011)

⁴² Interviews with Various Gender Trained Head and Regular Teachers, Udalguri district (Nov. 2011); Runamai Das, Head Teacher, Bijoypur ME School, Borlung, Murkongselek, Dhemaji (Nov. 2011)

immediately arrested. While in custody, the broker revealed the location of the missing girls in Delhi. This arduous process took two years, but on 9 August 2009, 12 of the trafficked girls returned home thanks to the concerted efforts of Nazir, Kalyan, the Assam Police, and the community.

Source: Interview with Nazir Hussein, Udalguri district (Nov. 2011)

Beyond generating awareness, teachers also take the initiative to conduct enrolment drives and investigate girls' absences from school. Teachers visit homes to convince parents of the importance of education and the necessity of sending their daughters to school.⁴³ Other teachers, particularly in Udalguri⁴⁴, reported that they were using their newly acquired awareness on RTE from NPEGEL training, to compel parents to send their children back to school. Deepak Senapati of Baruahola MV School in Tinsukia district now checks the monthly attendance registers for absentees and asks female teachers to speak to them. Teachers even pay out of their own pocket to travel long distances to girls' homes to deal with dropouts and poor attendance.

In addition, gender trained teachers in Dhemaji and Udalguri districts mentioned taking a greater interest in engaging girls in extra-curricular activities for their overall development (see Box 3). These teachers organised events for girls to participate in sports, quizzes, extempore speech competitions, and cultural events which include storytelling, singing, and dancing.⁴⁵ Across the board, these teachers encourage the participation of girls in NPEGEL activities citing examples of successful Indian and Assamese role models such as Indira Gandhi and Kanaklata Barua.

Box 3. Dhemaji Teacher Sensitises Community

Monsu Chamuah is a schoolteacher at the Nilakhpur MV School in Sissiborgaon, Dhemaji district. He received gender training from AMSS twice, once in 2008-09 and again in 2009-10. From the training, he learned that there should be no difference in how boys and girls are treated; girls can ride bicycles, play football, cricket and volleyball, and even wear shorts. Returning to Dhemaji, Monsu organised a meeting in his village with parents to share the lessons he had learned. Some parents listened intently and thanked him for the meeting, while others made negative comments. Unperturbed, Monsu held a second meeting with the community and invited the NPEGEL Block Coordinator to also address the audience.



Monsu (centre), a gender sensitised teacher, conducts community meetings in Dhemaji

Monsu made house-to-house visits motivating parents to give their daughters more freedom and

⁴³ Interviews with Various Gender Trained Head and Regular Teachers, Udalguri District (Nov. 2011); Various Gender Trained Head and Regular Teachers, Tinsukia DIU Office (Dec. 2011)

⁴⁴ Interview with Various Gender Trained Head and Regular Teachers, Udalguri District (Nov. 2011)

⁴⁵ Interviews with Various Gender Trained Head and Regular Teachers, Udalguri District (Nov. 2011); Head and Regular Teachers, Telam Tribal ME School (Dec. 2011)

exposure. His persistence paid off and parents reluctantly agreed. Now, girls in his village play sports and undergo self-defence training. Girls in his school are learning embroidery and life skills, and even climbing trees! He notes with joy that attendance and academic performance of girls has increased tremendously, with a reduction in dropouts. The mind-set of the village has also changed and the community members approve of his efforts. Two girls from his school won prizes at a Girl Child Day celebration and everyone was proud and full of praise. “*All this [change] is thanks to the NPEGEL programme,*” Monsu remarks.

Source: Interview with Monso Chamuah, Dhemaji DIU Office (Nov. 2011)

4.1.2 Community Support for Girls’ Education

Awareness-raising and community mobilisation through gender training for school-based CBO members, Girl Child Day, and Annual Cluster Meetings have contributed to increased girls’ enrolment, regular attendance, and retention. As with teachers, these CBO members have demonstrated greater awareness of the subtle and ingrained patriarchal practices that limit girls in all aspects of life. As a result, many community members have begun treating their daughters more equally. Parents are now giving their daughters pocket money, allowing them to move outside the home to participate in sports and other competitions, and redistributing household chores among their children.⁴⁶

With changed attitudes, in all three districts, SMC and MG take the initiative to: (a) identify and re-enrol dropout girls into school; (b) conduct community meetings to raise awareness about gender discrimination and girls’ education; (c) monitor school attendance; and (d) encourage students to take part in NPEGEL activities (see Box 4).⁴⁷

Box 4. Mobilising Communities through Mothers’ Groups

In 2007, 30 members of the School Management Committee and Mothers’ Group of Telam LP and ME Schools in Murkongselek, Dhemaji district, received gender training under NPEGEL. Of the 30 participants, 12 were MG members belonging to multiple villages in Telam cluster. After the two-day training, the 12 MG members returned to their respective villages and shared the lessons with other women and MG representatives. Of their own accord, these women moved through their communities to identify out-of-school children and convince parents to let their daughters go to school.

“*We went to those houses where girls were sent out to work in other people’s homes,*” Chitralekha, an MG member in Telam cluster said. “*We explained to them that [in] today’s world, a person without education, has no value. [A woman] will not be able to develop her mental faculties and be able to have responsibility of a family.*” Today, the MG members are advocates for girls in their local communities and encourage girl students to attend school and engage in NPEGEL activities.

Source: Interview with CBO members, Telam Tribal ME School, Telam, Murkongselek, Dhemaji (Nov. 2011)

In addition, awareness-generation activities such as Girl Child Day and Annual Cluster Meeting have highlighted the potential achievements of girl students and built community

⁴⁶ Interviews with CBO members, Bijoypur ME School, Borlung, Murkongselek, Dhemaji (Nov. 2011); Various Gender Trained CBO members and *sangha* women, Tinsukia DIU Office (Dec. 2011); Various Gender Trained CBO members and *sangha* women, Udalguri District (Nov. 2011)

⁴⁷ Interviews with CBO members and *sangha* women, Udalguri District (Nov. 2011); CBO members, Dhemaji DIU Office (Nov. 2011); CBO members, Telam Tribal ME School, Telam, Murkongselek, Dhemaji (Nov. 2011); CBO members and *sangha* women, Tinsukia DIU Office (Dec. 2011)

support. These events celebrate girls who have succeeded in either sports competitions or the talent search exam, and showcase their skills. Attending community members recognise the higher capacities of girls and discuss the negative effects of traditional gender norms and discriminatory practices on girls' development.

4.1.3 Sangha Support for Girls' Education

In areas where *sanghas* (MS-based women's associations) are operational, AMSS's strategy to create an enabling environment for girls' education is more effective. At the beginning of the programme, in 2007, *sangha* women surveyed their villages to identify dropout girls or out-of-school girls.⁴⁸ Through door-to-door visits, enrolment drives, and community meetings, *sangha* women have convinced families to allow their children to (re)join the education system.⁴⁹ This has also stopped daughters being involved in sibling care or domestic labour.⁵⁰ *Sangha* women and *kishori mancha* (MS-based adolescent girls' group) girls in Dhemaji district convene community awareness meetings.



Sangha women (left and centre) and AMSS Sahoyogini (right) mobilise communities

CBO members who also belong to the *sanghas* share lessons from NPEGEL gender training with their communities. *Sanghas* play a significant role as they contribute to the degree to which communities are supportive towards girls' education and NPEGEL.⁵¹ This has resulted in the community being mobilised into larger and more active taskforces in AMSS areas compared to other areas.

4.1.4 Block Coordinators Enhance Delivery of NPEGEL

Where *sanghas* are not operational, AMSS enlists the support of the SSA Cluster Resource Centre Coordinators (CRCCs), Block Coordinators, *Sahoyoginis* (AMSS field workers), and school-based CBO members to mobilise the community. However, these stakeholders have other responsibilities limiting their time and involvement with NPEGEL. In all three blocks, lack of manpower on the ground represents a significant gap for effective implementation. In Dhemaji and Udalguri districts where physical conditions deter travel to interior areas, Block Coordinators are crucial for NPEGEL's effective coordination.⁵²

⁴⁸ Interviews with Sahoyogini, Tinsukia DIU Office (Sep. 2011);

⁴⁹ This includes enrolment of girls into schools, MSKs, and bridge courses.

⁵⁰ Interviews with *sangha* women, Betonipam ME and MV Schools, Betonipam, Sissiborgaon, Dhemaji (Nov. 2011); CBO members and *sangha* women, Udalguri District (Nov. 2011); CBO members and *sangha* women, Tinsukia DIU Office (Dec. 2011)

⁵¹ Interviews with DPC, Tinsukia DIU Office (Sep. 2011); DPC, Udalguri DIU Office (Sep. 2011); DPC, Dhemaji DIU Office (Nov. 2011)

⁵² Interviews with Ex- Block Coordinator, Udalguri District (Nov. 2011); Block Coordinators, Dhemaji DIU Office (Nov. 2011)

In the absence of *sanghas*, Block Coordinators play a vital role in mobilising communities on the importance of education.⁵³ Tinsukia and Udalguri districts have no Block Coordinators whereas Dhemaji district has two per block. These coordinators have been in place since the programme's inception and have therefore established ties with both communities and schools. The four Block Coordinators, who live in their respective blocks, travel from cluster to cluster managing NPEGEL activities in schools or community locations, and even act as resource persons for gender training.

As a result of the Coordinators' interaction with local communities and schools, teachers, school-based CBO members, parents, and even students are all familiar with their respective Coordinator. *Sangha* women, teachers, and community members praised these women for their exceptional work in organising NPEGEL activities and mobilising the community. With seven to nine clusters assigned to each Coordinator, community members and Block Coordinators alike are calling for additional manpower for NPEGEL management. Despite having minimum AMSS grassroots presence, the NPEGEL model in Dhemaji district stands out in stark contrast to Tinsukia and Udalguri districts. This was seen as a direct outcome of the continued presence and commitment of Block Coordinators in the district.

4.2 Improved Participation of Girls in Education

Greater motivation to study, higher rates of attendance, and improved relationships with teachers have all contributed to enhanced participation of girls in the classroom. In schools across the three districts, teachers reported that girls were outdoing their male counterparts as a result of the additional facilities and attention provided to them.⁵⁴ Specific academic-oriented NPEGEL activities such as bridge courses, talent search exams, remedial teaching, educational tours, and mobile libraries have contributed to girls' enthusiasm for studying and improved academic performance.

4.2.1 Increased Enrolment and Attendance

Targeting dropout and never-enrolled girls, AMSS and UNICEF piloted a bridge course in the three NPEGEL districts in 2007. The course convinced many girls of the necessity of education, the importance of attending school regularly, and studying diligently (see Box 5 and Annex 6a). Bridge courses also allayed unfounded fears (e.g. corporal punishment), which made girls reluctant to join the education system.⁵⁵

Box 5. Bridge Course Mainstreams Dropouts

Mallika Barman's father had passed away when she was in primary school. After his death, her mother began working as a daily wage earner to make ends meet. Because of her family's financial problems, Mallika was forced to drop out and remained at home for 18 months.

In 2007, AMSS conducted a bridge course for two months. An AMSS field worker convinced Mallika's mother to allow her daughter to attend the bridge course, and within a month, Mallika was ready to re-join the regular school system. She enrolled in Class VI with the help of the field worker and the *Shiksha mitra* (the volunteer-teacher who conducts the bridge course).

⁵³ Interviews with DPC, Tinsukia DIU Office (Sep. 2011); Ex- Block Coordinators, Tinsukia DIU Office (Dec. 2011)

⁵⁴ Interviews with Various Gender Trained Head and Regular Teachers, Udalguri District (Nov. 2011); Head and Focal Teacher, Baruahola MV School, Baruahola, Guijan, Tinsukia (Aug. 2011); Various Gender Trained Head and Regular Teachers, Dhemaji DIU Office (Nov. 2011); Various Gender Trained Head and Regular Teachers, Tinsukia DIU Office (Dec. 2011)

⁵⁵ Interview with Bridge Course Girls, Dhemaji DIU Office (Nov. 2011)



Today, Mallika is a Class IX student in Bortongla High School in Udalguri district. Although her school is three kilometres away from her home, Mallika is regular and rides to school on her bicycle every day. She aspires to complete her higher secondary education and open her own tailoring shop.

Source: Interview with Mallika Barman, Khagarabari Janata ME School, Ghorashal, Bhergaon, Udalguri (Sep. 2011)



Sonjali (left) and Bobitha (right), mainstreamed girls from tea gardens, Tinsukia

The bridge course centres also equipped girls with the necessary knowledge and skills to succeed in their studies. For example, Nyanmoni Tasa, Ritumoni Rajuwar, and Mamoni Duarah, three girls from Khulamua Bamgaon village, admitted that prior to dropping out from Class II, II and IV, respectively, they were uncomfortable with reading. “*We did not know how to read before,*” Ritumoni says. “*We could read one or two words but could not read a full sentence.*” After the bridge course, they were able to better cope with their studies in school.

A total of 404 girls were enrolled into the bridge courses and approximately 60 per cent were mainstreamed into Classes III-VII (see Table 5).⁵⁶ Despite its success, the bridge course was discontinued due to the introduction of similar programmes by SSA. The lack of a critical number of girls geographically also made the courses unviable. Residential courses (e.g. MSKs) could be a feasible solution to handle geographical diffusion of out-of-school girls.

Table 5. AMSS Bridge Course Centres and Participants in 2007⁵⁷

District	Bridge Course Centres	Girls Enrolled	Girls Mainstreamed
Dhemaji	4	144	104
Tinsukia	6	193	95
Udalguri	2	67	44
TOTAL	12	404	243

A major contributing factor to higher girl participation in school, particularly for regular attendance, is life skills training. Life skills highlight the importance of education for girls’ overall development. After the training, girls became motivated to regularly attend school and convince resistant parents and community members of this need.⁵⁸ At the Telam Tribal ME School, girls were so determined to continue with their studies that a few girls, who were denied money to buy school materials and uniforms, engaged in wage labour during their free time to pay for their education.

⁵⁶ Interviews with Mainstreamed and Out-of-School Girls, Udalguri District (Nov. 2011); Bridge Course Girls, Dhemaji DIU Office (Nov. 2011); Bobitha Mura and Sonjali Samasi, Tinsukia DIU Office (Dec. 2011)

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Interview with Current Students, Telam Tribal ME School, Telam, Murkongselek, Dhemaji (Nov. 2011)

Even in tea garden communities – seen as one of the most underdeveloped in terms of education – the lure of NPEGEL activities has improved attendance. Among tea garden communities, adolescent girls engage in tea plucking, and absenteeism from school during the plucking season (June to November) is a common problem. Younger girls are often forced to stay at home to care for their siblings or manage housework. After the introduction of NPEGEL activities, schools in these areas have reported an increase in girls’ admissions, regular attendance, and improved attitudes among communities towards girls’ education.⁵⁹

4.2.2 Improved Academic Performance

Designed along the lines of the school curriculum, the talent search examination motivates many girls to continue their education. In all three districts, participating and succeeding in the talent search examination has induced greater interest in studies and parents’ support for their daughters’ education.⁶⁰ The prizes for the talent search exam and Girl Child Day, such as dictionaries, storybooks, and stationery, provide incentives to continue with school (see Box 6).

Box 6. Talent Search Exam Helps Student Stay in School

Thirteen-year-old Borokha Rabha is the youngest of four children and lives with her two sisters and one brother. Her father, a farmer, owns a small piece of land and grows rice and vegetables. Borokha’s family is very poor.

When Borokha was in Class IV, her parents thought that she was not good at her studies and wanted her to stop going to school. Even when she was selected for a school scholarship exam, her parents were not convinced of her abilities and did not let her participate. An AMSS field worker suggested that Borokha appear for a talent search exam. She was initially uninterested because she did not think she would succeed, but was finally convinced by the Sahoyogini. Borokha participated in the exam and to her surprise, stood first! When they heard the news, her friends crowded around her asking how she had done so well! Upon learning of her results, her parents were convinced of their daughter’s academic prowess and let her continue on to Class V.



Borokha, a topper in the talent search exam

Today, Borokha is in Class VII. She loves going to school and her favourite subject is Assamese language. She has taken part in Girl-Child Day event, singing and dancing competitions and even competed in extempore speeches. She has many dreams. When she grows up, she wants to become a pilot. When asked why a pilot, Borokha says, “I want to see the world from above. I want to fly.”

Source: Interview with Borokha Rabha, Udalguri (Nov. 2011)

⁵⁹ Interview with Head Teacher, Dhulijan LP School, Langkashi, Itakhuli, Tinsukia (Sep. 2011)

⁶⁰ Interviews with Current Students, Bazaloni ME School, Ithakul, Tinsukia (Sep. 2011); Interview with DPC, Udalguri DIU Office (Sep. 2011)

Remedial teaching has enabled some academically weaker students to succeed in their studies. At the beginning of each class, students outline the specific subjects and issues they are finding difficult; the remedial teacher then revises these subjects. Mainiaw, a student in Udalguri district, used to come in 20th place in her class; after remedial teaching, she stands at third place.⁶¹

Educational tours provide a unique opportunity for experiential learning (see Box 7). In Dhemaji district, girls were taken to the Arunachal Pradesh border, tea gardens, historical monuments, religious sites and animal parks.⁶² Reflecting on the value of this activity, Pradeepa Bora, the previous Head Teacher of Betonipam ME School in Sissiborgaon, Dhemaji district, explained, *“The girls never knew about such things; they had only read about the different places that they are now able to see.”*

Box 7. Educational Tour Inspires NPEGEL Student

Jahnavi Dihingia is a fifteen-year-old student, studying in Class IX at Panitola Girls High School in Tinsukia district. Her father works as an agricultural labourer to support her mother, two brothers, and Jahnavi. Despite financial constraints, Jahnavi is fortunate to have a family that values her education and encourages her to attend school regularly.

When NPEGEL activities were introduced at her elementary school, Jahnavi gained the unique opportunity to participate in the educational tours organised for both lower and upper primary level students. As part of these tours, Jahnavi visited monuments and historical sites built by the Ahom dynasty, who had ruled what is present-day Assam for 600 years, as well as nature parks and local government offices. Reflecting on the experience, Jahnavi explains how her learning transformed after the educational tour, *“We had just read about it [the Ahom dynasty] before, but now we saw how the Ahom kings had built monuments. It was built so long ago, but it is still standing!”* When asked what her favourite subject is, Jahnavi readily answers, *“I love history and that is why social science is my favourite!”*



Jahnavi’s passion for social science developed after educational tour

Jahnavi also got the chance to participate in the talent search exam and life skills training. In Class VII, she came in second place for the talent search exam and received a certificate, diary, and books, adding to her sense of achievement. Jahnavi notes that life skills training changed her ability to speak in public. *“After going through the training, I became very confident and can now give speeches in front of the community without hesitation.”* A bright and enthusiastic student, Jahnavi was selected to represent her school in the National Children’s Science Congress in Jaipur, Rajasthan at the end of 2011.

Source: Interview with Jahnavi Dihingia, Tinsukia DIU Office (Dec. 2011)

⁶¹ Interview with Current Students, Udalguri District (Nov. 2011)

⁶² Interview with Block Coordinators, Dhemaji DIU Office (Nov. 2011)

The mobile library motivates girls to read more indicated by increased demand for books on science, fiction, general knowledge and biographies. In Dhemaji district, girls from the Betonipam MV and ME Schools have specifically requested biographies of notable Assamese personalities such as Bhupen Hazarika and Kanaklata Barua. Girls from Bodo communities have even asked for books in the Bodo language.⁶³ However, these changes in girls' reading habits are generally limited to students of the MCSs, which have access to the mobile library. The mobile library, which is supposed to travel from the MCS to the various cluster schools seldom leaves the MCS. Neither AMSS staff nor school teachers are able to take on this additional responsibility and consequently, access to the mobile libraries, health check-up camps, and recreational equipment remain limited to a few schools.⁶⁴

4.3 Empowering Girls

NPEGEL activities have helped girls become confident, affirmative, and critical in their thinking and analysis. Girls now fight for their rights and challenge restrictions both at home and in their communities. Self-defence training, sports activities, and life skills training have further developed girls' perceptions of gender and generated an awareness of their bodies, translating into greater ability to address traditional harmful practices and mobility.

4.3.1 Increased Voice

After life skills training, most girls reported that they feel confident to speak in front of a big gathering (see Box 8). They pose questions in class and freely interact with their teachers and male peers.⁶⁵ Concentration levels in classroom activities have improved, and girls are now ready to take on many more challenges.⁶⁶ *"I used to be afraid of asking questions in class. In life skills training we learned about these issues and now I can ask questions without hesitation,"* said Moonmoon Rajkhowa from Tinsukia.⁶⁷



Lipikia (right) discovered writing through life skills

Box 8. Finding a Purpose in Life

Lipikia Chetia is a Class VIII student at the Baruahola MV School in Tinsukia district. Although her parents encouraged her to attend school, Lipikia felt she had no purpose in life. Then, Lipikia received three days of life skills training at her school and made a surprising discovery. *"At the end of each day, we had to write a report for a wall magazine [which included] stories, articles and poems,"* Lipikia explains. *"This was the beginning of my writing."*

Since the training, Lipikia has become a prolific writer and her confidence increased.

⁶³ Interview with Head Teacher, KhagarabariJanata ME School, Ghorashal, Bhergaon, Udalguri (Sep. 2011); DPC, Udalguri DIU Office (Sep. 2011)

⁶⁴ Interviews with Head Teacher (MCS Checklist worksheet), Borpathar LP School, Hapjan, Hapjan, Tinsukia (Sep. 2011); Head Teacher (MCS Checklist worksheet), Baruahola MV School, Baruahola, Guijan, Tinsukia (Sep. 2011); Head Teacher (MCS Checklist worksheet), KhagarabariJanata ME School, Ghorashal, Bhergaon, Udalguri (Sep. 2011)

⁶⁵ Interview with Head and Focal Teacher, Baruahola MV School, Baruahola, Guijan, Tinsukia (Aug. 2011)

⁶⁶ Interviews with Teachers and Self-Defence Trainer, Shastrinagar ME School, Hapjan, Tinsukia (Sep. 2011)

⁶⁷ Interview with Current Students, Baruahola MV School, Baruahola, Guijan, Tinsukia (Sep. 2011)

“My writing was the best among the 11 schools that Mitalli [AMSS DRP] is in charge of,” she says. Lipikia began sharing her poems at Saturday Club, where students engage in quiz and sport competitions and recite literary works. Now her poems are published in the school magazine and have even appeared in a district magazine for children.

Lipikia’s confidence, outspokenness, and gender awareness are evident even at home. Her older sister, who was studying in college at the time, received a marriage proposal. “Because of life skills training, I stopped this marriage,” Lipikia exclaims. “Girls should not get married so young!” Convinced, her father supported her stand and the marriage did not materialise.

Lipikia’s parents are very happy with her achievements. “Since I am more informed and aware, if there are certain questions and spellings, my parents consult me,” she says proudly. For the future, Lipikia would like to be a teacher. “All famous people, whether a doctor or a pilot, it is a teacher who has made them [into] that.”

Source: Interview with Lipikia Chetia, Tinsukia DIU Office (Dec. 2011)

4.3.2 Standing Up Against Harmful Traditional Practices

As a result of life skills training, girls recognise that social customs such as forced isolation during menstruation are detrimental to their health status, educational achievements, and overall development (see Box 9).⁶⁸ If parents ask them to be absent from school to help in the preparations for a family function, girls convince them about the importance of regularly attending school. At home, the girls insist that their brothers take part in domestic activities such as cutting of vegetables and cooking, and demand that they be able to attend school regularly (see Annex 6b).⁶⁹



Nipora (left) and Rumi (right) fight menstruation taboos

Box 9. Fighting Menstruation Taboos

Menstruation is marked by a specific set of social restrictions for young girls in some conservative communities in Dhemaji district. This biological change is accompanied by taboos forbidding young women to bathe for four days or sleep in their regular beds. While menstruating, girls are also prohibited from eating regular meals, touching utensils in the house, or applying oil to their hair. Tradition dictates that a young girl remains in the house for thirty days after the onset of menarche, necessitating high levels of school absenteeism which can contribute to an increase in dropout rates. Coupled with the unhygienic menstruation habits of these young girls, taboos make menarche a stressful and potentially harmful part of their lives.

During life skills training through NPEGEL, girls learn hygiene practices to be adopted during

⁶⁸ Interviews with Current Students, Betonipam ME and MV Schools, Betonipam, Sissiborgaon, Dhemaji (Nov. 2011); Current Students, Telam Tribal ME School, Telam, Murkongselek, Dhemaji (Nov. 2011); Baruahola MV School, Baruahola, Guijan, Tinsukia (Sep. 2011)

⁶⁹ Interview with Current Students, Dhemaji DIU Office (Nov. 2011); Current Students, Bijoypur ME School, Borlung, Murkongselek, Dhemaji (Nov. 2011)

menstruation. They are also taught that social customs such as restricted food intake and forced sleeping on the floor can be potentially dangerous to their health. But beyond improving health practices, life skills training provides girls with a platform to think about reproductive health and empowers them to make decisions to improve their health and wellbeing.

For twelve-year-old Rumi and fourteen-year-old Nipora of Betonipam village, training in life skills gave them the tools they needed to break free from stigma related to traditions during menstruation.

Both girls relied on early discussions with family members and repeated refusals to be treated differently during menstruation. More than once, before she even went through her first period, Rumi told her mother and father, “*When I attain puberty, please don’t make me sleep on the ground. Please let me sleep in my own bed.*” So when Rumi started menstruating, her family was prepared for her to break tradition and continue eating and sleeping in the house. Rumi also refused to stay home for thirty days, and returned to school after just 11 days.

Nipora enlisted the help of her mother and sister when she decided to break menstrual taboos. When she got her period, she bathed and cooked herself a meal, although she knew she was not supposed to do so. When her sister found her diverging from custom, Nipora explained, “*In life skills training, we were taught that we should be getting a proper bed to sleep in, so please don’t follow this tradition with me. We learned that we should be taking a bath and eating specific types of food. I want these facilities to be given to me.*” When neighbours complained, Nipora’s mother (a *sangha* woman) refused to back down and explained to them what the girls had learned during the training.

As a result, both Rumi and Nipora have not dropped out of school and hope to be able to graduate one day. Rumi aspires to be a teacher and Nipora, a doctor. Training in life skills helps girls such as Rumi and Nipora to challenge norms that might hamper their schooling, health, or wellbeing, and thus empowers them to live well and fulfil their ambitions.

Source: Interview with Rumi Duarah and Nipora Gogoi, Bentonipam ME School, Betonipam, Sissiborgaon, Dhemaji (Nov. 2011)

However, training in life skills has had less impact on students at the primary level where they relate less to the content of the course. This is because many have not yet experienced the restrictions around mobility and menstruation that adolescent girls face. This brings out the need for different topics to be introduced in life skills training to younger girls.

4.3.3 Mobilisation of Girls Builds Support

Collectivisation of school-going girls and the formation of *kishori manchas* is an emerging phenomenon, particularly in Dhemaji and Udalguri districts. *Kishori manchas* in Dhemaji have enlisted the support of the *sangha* women and undertake house visits to dropouts.⁷⁰ Life skills training on the ill-effects of child marriage have led to girls voicing their opposition to early marriage. Teachers report that girls convene their own meetings to discuss health issues, hygiene, menstruation, nutrition, and other problems.⁷¹ For example, girls in Dhemaji district discussed rape, devised strategies to protect themselves and overcome restrictions on their mobility.⁷²

⁷⁰ Interview with Current Students, Betonipam ME and MV Schools, Betonipam, Sissiborgaon, Dhemaji (Nov. 2011)

⁷¹ Interview with Various Gender Trained Head and Regular Teachers, Dhemaji DIU Office (Nov. 2011)

⁷² Interview with Current Students, Telam Tribal ME School, Telam, Murkongselek, Dhemaji (Nov. 2011)

In Udalguri district, girls who received NPEGEL inputs formed six *kishori manchas*, of which two are not even in the areas covered by AMSS.⁷³ Girls attend *sangha* meetings and various trainings with their mothers, which gives them more inputs on their rights.⁷⁴ The establishment of *kishori manchas* is not as prevalent in Tinsukia as compared to the other two districts due to the traditional value systems of tea garden tribes, insufficient AMSS human resources, and low levels of AMSS presence.

In areas where *kishori manchas* have not yet been formed, girls are voicing this need. “We need a group to attract girls whose parents are conservative,” says Dharmishwari Pegu, a student of Dhemaji district.⁷⁵ “We would go to these houses as a group and spread awareness. We would say that girls should study, just like boys, because without education, a person has no value. Lack of education will hinder any work.”

4.3.4 Challenging Gender Stereotypes

Karate, kung-fu, boxing, and taekwondo have benefitted upper primary girls, boosted their confidence, and helped them take part in traditionally male dominated activities. Most girls reported an increased sense of safety.⁷⁶ “I was afraid to go out alone in the evening, as I was worried that boys would harass me. Now I feel confident that I can tackle any situation with the self-defence training I received,” says Khunjali Nijora, a student in Udalguri district.⁷⁷ However, self-defence has been difficult for younger girls as they find the moves difficult to grasp.

Girls who excelled in sports began travelling to participate in district and state competitions.⁷⁸ For many, this was the first time they had ever travelled outside their village, and they are now celebrated as local heroes in their communities (see Box 10).

Box 10. Udalguri Girls Excel through Kickboxing Training

Ansumai and Dharitry met in Udalguri district when they trained for kickboxing together during NPEGEL self-defence training held two years ago. During the course, the two girls learned tai-chi, *katta* and a variety of kicks.



Ansumai leads kickboxing training

After the introductory course, Ansumai and Dharitry wanted to continue kickboxing but were met with family resistance. However, support from other family members, the kickboxing instructor, and community members eventually enabled them to continue. Both girls travelled outside of Udalguri district for inter-district competitions, and Dharitry attended a

⁷³ Interview with DPC, Udalguri District (Sep. 2011)

⁷⁴ Interview with DPC, Udalguri District (Sep. 2011)

⁷⁵ Interview with Current Students, Telam Tribal ME School, Telam, Murkongselek, Dhemaji (Nov. 2011)

⁷⁶ Interview with CBO members, Borpathar LP School, Hapjan, Hapjan, Tinsukia (Sep. 2011); CBO members, Shastrinagar ME School, Hapjan, Tinsukia (Sep. 2011)

⁷⁷ Interview with Ex-Students, Khagarabari Janata ME School, Ghorashal, Bhergaon, Udalguri (Sep. 2011)

⁷⁸ Interviews with Current Students, Bazaloni ME School, Langkashi, Itakhuli, Tinsukia (Sep. 2011); Current Students, Dhemaji DIU Office (Nov. 2011)



Dharitry participates in state and national kickboxing competitions

national competition in Kolkata. “I have been to different places and I have enjoyed this,” Dharitry says about traveling for kickboxing competitions. “I had never travelled out of Udalguri district before. [Now] I get respect in school from both teachers and other students.” Bringing home medals and stories of their travels, the girls are now celebrities in their schools and communities for their achievements.

Kickboxing to Empowerment

Kickboxing improved Dharitry’s confidence and taught her ways to defend herself. “I used to remain silent,” she says. “Local boys would physically harass us on the roads by pushing us. We would go tell our mothers and they would tell us to remain silent.” Now, Dharitry responds to harassment in a firm, but respectful way and clearly asserts her rights. “We are not causing you any harm,” she says to the boys. “We have the right to move around. Why are you to bother us?” She now reacts to bullying, if necessary: “I’m prepared to kick them after self-defence training.”

Ansumai, however, has undergone a different type of transformation. She continues to practice and has even assumed an unofficial leadership role by conducting classes when her instructor is unavailable. The instructor allows her to lead the class telling her in advance which exercises to demonstrate.

Ansumai’s parents, however, still do not approve of kickboxing. Community members tease her and ask what she will do with the training as a girl. She gets ridiculed for wearing shorts and pants, perceived as masculine attire. Despite this, Ansumai continues training and wants to join the army. From her kickboxing training, she feels empowered to defend herself and follow her own path in life.

Source: Interviews with Ansumai Boro and Dharitry Rabha, Udalguri (Nov. 2011)

Despite schools having playgrounds and sports equipment, girls rarely took part in sports, remaining mere spectators. After sports training through NPEGEL, this scenario has changed. Now, girls in the playground are a common sight.

Girls across the districts are now aware of their potential to achieve. Lessons about their rights about their rights and their athletic achievements have taught them valuable lessons for gender equality. Trishna, after receiving life skills training, created a chart outlining all the work that was required of girls and boys during each day.⁷⁹ She showed her mother the chart demonstrating that housework was more required of girls, and asked for more equitable distribution of chores between her brother and herself. Girls also participate in cricket and football, earlier stereotyped as “boys’ games”. Consequently, girls have demonstrated that their identity as girls does not limit their ability to participate in “male activities”.

4.4 Economic Empowerment

In an effort to empower dropout and out-of-school girls, AMSS provides vocational exposure in Tinsukia and Udalguri districts. These disadvantaged girls realise their potential to earn

⁷⁹ Interview with Current Students, Bijoypur ME School, Borlung, Murkongselek, Dhemaji (Nov. 2011)

and understand the importance of economic self-reliance. Most girls who participated in AMSS's short seven-day vocational exposure courses have not started small enterprises; however, they have expressed their interest and willingness to learn, if such opportunities arise.⁸⁰ A minority have pursued their interest in a specific trade and even started small businesses (see Box 11 and Annex 6c).⁸¹

Box 11. Two Dropouts Discover the Entrepreneurs Within



Momi (left) and Alima (right) started a business after vocational exposure

Momi Chetia and Alima Khatowal are school dropouts from Moran Lesanka village in Tinsukia district. Momi was forced to discontinue her studies after Class VIII because it was difficult to commute to the closest high school some 4-5 km away. "When it rained," Momi explains, "[the roads] get flooded." Alima, on the other hand, felt compelled to drop out in Class XII due to her family's financial difficulties. "My parents said that I could go to school and that they would manage. But I didn't want to give them that much trouble."

The girls then went through a 10-day training course on making handicrafts such as stuffed toys and artificial flowers, together with painting on cloth, pots, and other items. Reflecting on this training, Alima remarks, "After the first training, I believed that I could use this [skill] and do something for myself financially."

Soon after, a one-month training was held by AMSS in their village youth centre where the girls learned embroidery, toy making, creating decorative gift items from wax, as well as decorating bags, bed sheets, sofa covers and cushions.

After the two training sessions, both girls were selected as AMSS resource persons to impart similar trainings to other groups. Called on once a month, the pair would train about 20 girls and get paid. Accumulating their earnings, the girls soon had a combined savings of Rs.9,000. Alima and Momi then took a loan of Rs.2,000 from the *sangha* to open a shop in July 2010. "As soon as we got this money, we opened a shop. We bought a little showcase [which] we placed in the shop and filled with toys and artefacts; the people of the village would see this and buy them," Alima describes.

Today, five girls work at the shop. Within six months of opening it, Momi and Alima repaid their loan. On an average, the store brings in Rs.5,000-6,000 per month. Products and services vary depending on the season and festivals. In winter, the girls make embroidered shawls. During *puja* time and *Bihu* (an Assamese festival), orders are high adding to profits. Currently, the shop is very small and the girls plan to expand it. "Our wish is that we get more technically trained," Alima says. "We want to work on machines; we do it all by hand [now]. We paint on the baskets which we buy from outside. It would be nice to be able to make the baskets ourselves and then paint on them."

Source: Interview with Alima Khatowal and Momi Chetia, Tinsukia DIU Office (Dec. 2011)

⁸⁰ Interview with Mainstreamed and Out-of-School Girls, Udalguri District (Nov. 2011)

⁸¹ Interviews with Mainstreamed and Out-of-School Girls, Udalguri District (Nov. 2011); Vocational Training Girls, Tinsukia DIU Office (Dec. 2011)

For school students, life skills also teach girls the importance of savings. Students mentioned that earlier they had no concept of savings, and spent whatever money they received but are now able to save. Many mentioned that this training helped them focus on their future path. Several have imparted this practice to their families who consequently have also started saving.⁸²

“My parents give me Rs.10 every week as pocket money. In addition, I also saved the money I received occasionally as gifts. With the help of these savings, I bought a new cycle for Rs.2,000.”

- *Liza Gogoi (Class VIII),
Baruahola MV School,*

5 Lessons Learnt and Recommendations

AMSS’s implementation of NPEGEL follows a comprehensive model that address girls’ needs in education and for overall development. In addition to its innovative activities, this NPEGEL model benefits from AMSS’s existing programme for empowering women and girls, enhancing the programme’s impact. The strategic partnership between AMSS and UNICEF has laid the foundation for a strong and sustainable programme, particularly regarding gender sensitisation of schools and communities. SSA’s funding for NPEGEL has enabled AMSS to build and expand the NPEGEL programme into what it is today.

5.1.1 Challenges Facing AMSS NPEGEL Implementation

Despite the programme’s strengths, AMSS faces major challenges in effective implementation of NPEGEL. Challenges such as difficult physical terrain, inaccessibility, natural disasters, socially conservative communities, and poorly resourced schools, to a large extent, determine the impact of the programme on girls, schools, and communities. Programmatic issues such as insufficient human resources, low levels of funding, and lack of influence over the education system further limit AMSS’s impact.



Girls demand longer NPEGEL activities, Udalguri.

Due to NPEGEL’s budget, there is a **shortage of staff in AMSS** to coordinate NPEGEL activities and oversee community mobilisation efforts, hindering implementation.⁸³ This is clearly demonstrated through the lack of contact between the MCSs and cluster schools, a staff function performed by Block Coordinators, where they exist. Although many of the MCSs convene a Girl Child Day event and a cluster-level sports competition, these activities are organised by AMSS staff and

⁸² Interview with Current Students, Bazaloni M.E. School, Ithakuli, Tinsukia (Sep. 2011)

⁸³ Interviews with DPC and DRP, Tinsukia DIU Office (Sep. 2011); Ex- Block Coordinators, Tinsukia DIU Office (Dec. 2011); DPC and DRP, Udalguri DIU Office (Sep. 2011); SPD, AMSS State Resource Centre, Guwahati (Sep. 2011); Ex- Block Coordinator, Udalguri District (Nov. 2011); Block Coordinators, Dhemaji DIU Office (Nov. 2011); DPC, Dhemaji DIU Office (Nov. 2011)

field workers (who are already engaged in other MS activities), or proactive teachers.⁸⁴ Clusters with committed Block Coordinators are more successful in meeting the intended outcomes of the programme. Therefore, NPEGEL guidelines and budgets should include resources to hire Block Coordinators for better programme implementation.

Another major challenge arising from **inadequate funding** is limited programme coverage. For instance, due to funding limitations, only 30 girl students are able to participate in each activity per school at a given time, thus excluding many.⁸⁵ In addition, each student is only able to undergo each activity once and that too, for a short duration. As these young students are only able to receive an introduction to each activity, they often forget the lessons and skills they learned. As with any learning, refresher and repeat activities are essential to reinforce these lessons and skills.

5.1.2 Building Synergies with Government and Other Stakeholders

A potential solution to address these problems is to advocate for the **institutionalisation of AMSS NPEGEL activities** into other organisations, government agencies, and programmes working in the area of girl's education. With more funding and resources at its disposal for girls' education, SSA has demonstrated that it is able to increase coverage, duration of activities, and provision of equipment and/or additional materials for participants. For instance, while AMSS provides 45 days of self-defence training over two months to 30 girl students at each school, SSA through its 'Girls' Education' budget is able to extend self-defence instruction to the same number of girls for 72 days over a period of six months.

Currently, AMSS is working to **establish long-term relationships between schools and community institutions**. In all three districts, AMSS district teams are trying to collaborate with the District Sports Authorities to provide self-defence and sports training to girls at NPEGEL schools, free of cost, on a long-term basis. In some districts, NPEGEL utilises ASHA workers to convene health check-up camps for school-going girls. Employing local resource persons (e.g. *sangha* women as remedial teachers) further enhances community ownership of the programme, and minimises AMSS's role as the implementing agency. Such linkages with community institutions and local service providers would necessarily have positive implications for the sustainability of NPEGEL.

Synergies and linkages with existing government programmes for adolescent girls can strengthen NPEGEL activities. The Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls (SABLA) and *Kishori Shakti Yojana* are two government programmes that aim to improve the nutritional, health, and development status of adolescent girls. Linking these schemes up with similar NPEGEL activities such as life skills training and health check-up camps will enable adolescent girls to mobilise and thus, access more resources.

Similarly, AMSS promotes the creation of *kishori manchas*, adolescent girls' groups, with a rights-based approach. Currently, the formation of *kishori manchas* is emphasised only through NPEGEL's life skills training, but this strategy should cut across multiple programmatic components and be facilitated by community members, teachers and other stakeholders. To ensure the survival and effectiveness of these girl groups, synergies between NPEGEL and Mahila Samakhya, *sanghas*, and other women's groups should be encouraged.

⁸⁴ Interviews with Sahoyogini, Tinsukia DIU Office (Sep. 2011); Sahoyogini, Udalguri DIU Office (Sep. 2011); DPC, Dhemaji DIU Office (Nov. 2011)

⁸⁵ Interview with Teachers, Shastrinagar ME School, Hapjan, Hapjan, Tinsukia (Sep. 2011)

5.1.3 Scaling Up Gender Sensitisation Training

While gender training is an important activity for both CBO members and teachers, AMSS was only able to cover 69 per cent of NPEGEL teachers before it was instructed to stop these trainings in 2010. Gender training was generally limited to one session per teacher. In 2011, SSA began rolling out a gender training programme to improve the academic environment, covering approximately 100 teachers across the state every year. While SSA provides this training, it is limited compared to the scale AMSS was reaching. From 2008-2009, AMSS provided training for an average of 802 teachers per year in three districts. At the current rate, SSA is not reaching a critical mass. As such, it is crucial that this gender training for teachers is scaled up and institutionalised as part of all teacher trainings provided by SSA.

Active teachers and community members, who received AMSS's gender training, are now demanding refresher training to enhance their work with the community and build their own capacities to make schools more inclusive for girls. Towards this end, school staff and CBO members are also requesting the inclusion of parents, community members, and *sangha* women in the two-day gender trainings. Therefore, for greater impact, NPEGEL activities should be extended in terms of duration and frequency. Further, it is critical that even if institutionalised, SSA, AMSS, and other practitioners **extend gender training to multiple stakeholders** in Assam to create a girl-friendly environment in both schools and communities.

5.1.4 Broadening the Scope and Depth of NPEGEL's Reach

The NPEGEL **guidelines delineate the scope of AMSS's activities** with the target population clearly defined as girls from ages 6-14 years of age. However, the guidelines also target groups that are overage. The programme, therefore, should also lend itself to bringing dropout girls who are overage back into mainstream schools or enable them to enter the formal labour market. Girls have expressed their dissatisfaction with the brevity of the vocational exposure activity. Girls should be provided with linkages to vocational training centres and apprenticeships to be equipped with the skills to pursue a trade.

The NPEGEL model currently appears to have **greater impact on girls at the upper primary level**. The content of life skills training is geared more to older girls to overcome challenges they face during adolescence. Younger girls have difficulties keeping up the level of instruction of self-defence. Bearing in mind that the majority of AMSS's target schools are primary schools, it is important to tailor the programme activities and curriculum to both age groups.

NPEGEL's MCS-to-cluster school system poses problems for the programme in terms of equity, inclusion, and resource allocation. As MCSs receive an initial grant for infrastructural works, equipment, and resources, such as the mobile library, these schools have a comparative advantage. AMSS, in some districts, has found methods to bypass the inequity created in resource distribution to include cluster schools. In Udalguri and Dhemaji districts, for example, the 'best school' award provides an in-kind donation of books worth Rs.5,000. This decreases a cluster school's dependence on the MCS to some extent. However, participation of girls from cluster schools to events organised at the MCS is limited due to distance. Therefore, efforts must be made to enhance the facilities of cluster schools to equalise the playing field and provide universal access to all girls.

6 Conclusions

The greatest strength of the AMSS-NPEGEL model lies in its strategy to **create an environment which fosters girls' education, development, and empowerment**. By providing gender training for teachers and CBO members involved in schools, AMSS, with support from UNICEF and SSA, built the capacities of teachers, schools, and community members to support girls' education and create a girl-friendly educational environment.

Recognising that improvements in girls' education requires more than providing girls access to schools, AMSS's NPEGEL model seeks to develop girls' abilities to participate fully and equally in all aspects of their education. By adopting a **holistic approach** in its implementation, AMSS addresses underlying socio-cultural perceptions and norms that limit girls' access, participation, and achievement in education. The majority of AMSS interventions deal with girls directly, and are complementary in terms of intended outcomes. The



Girls claim increased awareness from NPEGEL, Dhemaji

The educational tours, mobile library, remedial teaching, and talent search examination aim to improve girls' academic performance, thereby motivating them to take a greater interest in education. The health check-up camps and life skills training address disadvantaged girls' health needs and raise awareness on their rights. Trainings in self-defence and various sports, and vocational exposure introduce girls to new skills that build confidence, increase participation in out-of-school activities, and challenge traditional gender norms.

The strategic partnership between AMSS and UNICEF has demonstrated the **efficacy of influencing government programmes through piloting** of innovative NPEGEL activities. In the first few years of the programme, UNICEF provided essential support to innovative activities such as self-defence training, educational tours, remedial teaching, and gender training, to name a few. These activities were mainstreamed into AMSS's regular NPEGEL implementation and are now covered by the SSA budget.

In terms of effectiveness, relevance, and sustainability, the AMSS-implemented NPEGEL benefits from the organisation's **existing programmes for women and girls**. In clusters and villages where there is already an AMSS presence, *sangha* women take the initiative to monitor NPEGEL activities, conduct extra-curricular activities for school children, engage in enrolment campaigns and actively try to mainstream identified dropouts. Out-of-school girls are often mainstreamed through residential schooling facilities such as AMSS-run MSKs. Similarly, AMSS promotes the formation of *kishori manchas*, an activity that originally emerged from MS's work with *sangha* women. *Kishori manchas* have proven effective for NPEGEL particularly focusing on girls' ability to address absenteeism and harmful societal practices. Therefore, to enhance the environment for girls in both schools and communities, a greater convergence of NPEGEL, AMSS activities, and other adolescent girls' programmes is recommended.

The partnership between AMSS and UNICEF has strategically merged practitioner experience on the ground with state and national level advocacy efforts. The Roadmap document of MHRD, aimed at improving girls' education programmes across the country, reflects many of the strengths and lessons learnt from AMSS-run NPEGEL. In terms of improving access, AMSS and UNICEF have advocated for gender training for teachers and community mobilisation through women's collectives (e.g. *sanghas*) nationally. Emphasis is placed in the Roadmap on community involvement towards improving girls' access and retention in schools. The Roadmap document further calls for imbuing gender awareness among educators and programmatic staff at all levels, a direct input from the work of AMSS and UNICEF.

Overall, AMSS NPEGEL activities have demonstrated a positive impact, especially on girls from disadvantaged backgrounds, in terms of improved attendance and retention, better academic performance, increased self-esteem, self-awareness, and empowerment. For enhanced and sustained impact, however, this programme requires additional resources for coordination, community mobilisation, and extended coverage of students and teachers, through government institutionalisation. The national vision for India as outlined in the Roadmap document is a definitive step in the right direction towards achieving MDG3 and closing the gender gap in education in India.

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